

A. MERRITT

The Fox
Woman

HANNES BOK

The Blue
Pagoda



THE FOX WOMAN
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FOREWORD

I have chosen to publish THE FOX WOMAN for several reasons, first of all because—when I heard of the existence of unpublished, incomplete manuscripts by the late A. Merritt—I wanted to see them in print and on the shelves with those other masterpieces Mr. Merritt wrote. And knowing Hannes Bok personally, knowing too that Mr. Bok has always yearned for, but never been given, the opportunity of illustrating Mr. Merritt's writings—I wanted to see that he was given the chance he desired.

The difficulty was—the manuscripts had never been finished. How could I present them to the public, stories without end? They must be supplied with further material so that their readers would be satisfied as to the probable denouement of each story. But what writer among those known to me would be qualified for the task?

I chose Mr. Bok—for besides being an artist, he is a writer. He has a complete collection of Mr. Merritt's works; all, I believe, except the first magazine printing of THE MOON POOL; the collection dates back to his childhood. While in Junior High School he was forced to copy THE METAL EMPEROR in longhand to secure a copy of it, and—he hoped to be a writer then—it influenced his manner of writing. He has told me he fought that influence because he wanted to be original; that the stories he finally sold to magazines were written in deliberate attempt to throw off that influence. He succeeded in some; in others I have heard the Merritt note.

So I offer THE FOX WOMAN, regretting its fragmentary state, with Hannes Bok's speculative ending. Shortages of labor and material beyond control have delayed its appearance, but here, at last, it is—and I think, well worth the waiting.

—PAUL DENNIS O'CONNOR

PART I:
THE FOX
WOMAN

BY A. MERRITT

I

THE ancient steps wound up the side of the mountain through the tall pines, patience trodden deep into them by the feet of twenty centuries. Some soul of silence, ancient and patient as the steps, brooded over them. They were wide, twenty men could have marched abreast upon them; lichens brown and orange traced strange symbols on their grey stones, and emerald mosses cushioned them. At times the steps climbed steep as stairs, and at times they swept leisurously around bastions of the mountain, but always on each side the tall pines stood close, green shoulder to shoulder, vigilant.

At the feet of the pines crouched laurels and dwarfed rhododendrons of a singular regularity of shape and of one height, that of a kneeling man. Their stiff and glossy leaves were like links on coats-of-mail . . . like the jade-lacquered scale-armor of the Green Archers of Kwanyin who guard the goddess when she goes forth in the Spring to awaken the trees. The pines were like watchful sentinels, and oddly like crouching archers were the laurels and the dwarfed rhododendrons, and they said as plainly as though with tongues: *Up these steps you may go, and down them—but never try to pass through us!*

A woman came round one of the bastions. She walked stubbornly, head down, as one who fights against a strong wind—or as one whose will rides, lashing the reluctant body on. One white shoulder and breast were bare, and on the shoulder was a bruise and blood, four scarlet streaks above the purpled patch as though a long-nailed hand had struck viciously, clawing. And as she walked she wept.

The steps began to lift. The woman raised her head and saw how steeply here they climbed. She stopped, her hands making little fluttering helpless motions.

She turned, listening. She seemed to listen not with ears alone but with every tensed muscle, her entire body one rapt chord of listening through which swept swift arpeggios of terror. The brittle twilight of the Yunnan highlands, like clearest crystal made impalpable, fell upon brown hair shot with gleams of dull copper, upon a face lovely even in its dazed horror. Her grey eyes stared down the steps, and it was as though they, too, were listening rather than seeing . . .

She was heavy with child . . .

She heard voices beyond the bend of the bastion, voices guttural and sing-song, angry and arguing, protesting and urging. She heard the shuffle of many feet, hesitating, halting, but coming inexorably on. Voices and feet of the *hung-hutzes*, the outlaws who had slaughtered her husband and Kenwood and their bearers a scant hour ago, and who but for Kenwood would now have her. They had found her trail.

She wanted to die; desperately Jean Meredith wanted to die; her faith taught her that then she would rejoin that scholarly, gentle lover-husband of hers whom she had loved so dearly although his years had been twice her own. It would not matter did they kill her quickly, but she knew they would not do that. And she could not endure even the thought of what must befall her through them before death came. Nor had she weapon to kill herself. And there was that other life budding beneath her heart.

But stronger than desire for death, stronger than fear of torment, stronger than the claim of the unborn was something deep within her that cried for vengeance. Not vengeance against the *hung-hutzes*—they were only a pack of wild beasts doing what was their nature to do. This cry was for vengeance against those who had loosed them, directed them. For this she knew had been done, although how she knew it she could not yet tell. It was not accident, no chance encounter that swift slaughter. She was sure of that.

It was like a pulse, that cry for vengeance; a pulse whose rhythm grew, deadening grief and terror, beating strength back into her. It was like a bitter spring welling up around her soul. When its dark waters had risen far enough they would touch her lips and she would drink of them . . . and then knowledge would come to her . . . she would know who had planned this evil thing, and why. But she must have time—time to drink of the waters—time to learn and avenge. She must live . . . for vengeance . . .

Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!

It was as though a voice had whispered the old text in her ear. She struck her breast with clenched hands; she looked with eyes grown hard and tearless up to the tranquil sky; she answered the voice:

"A lie! Like all the lies I have been taught of—You! I am through with—You! Vengeance! Whoever gives me vengeance shall be my God!"

The voices and the feet were nearer. Strange, how slowly, how reluctantly they advanced. It was as though they were afraid. She studied the woods beyond the pines. Impenetrable; or if not, then impossible for her. They would soon find her if she tried to hide there. She must go on—up the steps. At their end might be some hiding place... perhaps sanctuary...

Yes, she was sure the *hung-hutzes* feared the steps . . . they came so slowly, so haltingly . . . arguing, protesting . . .

She had seen another turn at the top of this steep. If she could reach it before they saw her, it might be that they would follow her no further. She turned to climb...

A fox stood upon the steps a dozen feet above her, watching her, barring her way. It was a female fox, a vixen. Its coat was all silken russet-red. It had a curiously broad head and slanted green eyes. On its head was a mark, silver white and shaped like the flame of a candle wavering in the wind.

The fox was lithe and graceful, Jean Meredith thought, as a dainty woman. A mad idea came, born of her despair and her denial of that God whom she had been taught from childhood to wor-

ship as all-good, all-wise, all-powerful. She thrust her hands out to the fox. She cried to it:

"Sister—you are woman! Lead me to safety that I may have vengeance—sister!"

Remember, she had just seen her husband die under the knives of the *hung-hutzes* and she was with child . . . and who can know upon what fantastic paths of unreality a mind so beset may stray.

As though it had understood the fox paced slowly down the steps. And again she thought how like a graceful woman it was. It paused a little beyond reach of her hand, studying her with those slanted green eyes—eyes clear and brilliant as jewels, sea-green, and like no eyes she had ever seen in any animal. There seemed faint mockery in their gaze, a delicate malice, but as they rested upon her bruised shoulder and dropped to her swollen girdle, she could have sworn that there was human comprehension in them, and pity. She whispered:

"Sister—help me!"

There was a sudden outburst of the guttural sing-song. They were close now, her pursuers, close to the bend of the steps round which she had come. Soon they must turn it and see her. She stood staring at the fox expectantly . . . hoping she knew not what.

The fox slipped by her, seemed to melt in the crouching bushes. It vanished.

Black despair, the despair of a child who finds itself abandoned to wild beasts by one it has trusted, closed in on Jean Meredith. What she had hoped for, what she had expected of help, was vague, unformulated. A miracle by alien gods, now she had renounced her own? Or had her appeal to the vixen deeper impulse? Atavistic awakenings, anthropomorphic, going back to that immemorial past when men first thought of animals and birds as creatures with souls like theirs, but closer to Nature's spirit; given by that spirit a wisdom greater than human, and more than human powers—servants and messengers of potent deities and little less than gods themselves.

Nor has it been so long ago that St. Francis of Assisi spoke to the beasts and birds as he did to men and women, naming them Brother Wolf and Brother Eagle. And did not St. Conan baptize the seals of the Orkneys as he did the pagan men? The past and all that men have thought in the past is born anew within us all. And sometimes strange doors open within our minds—and out of them or into them strange spirits come or go. And whether real or unreal, who can say?

The fox seemed to understand—had seemed to promise—something. And it had abandoned her, fled away! Sobbing, she turned to climb the steps.

Too late! The *hung-hutzes* had rounded the bend. There was a howling chorus. With obscene gestures, yapping threats, they ran toward her. Ahead of the pack was the pock-faced, half-breed Tibetan leader whose knife had been the first to cut her husband down. She watched them come, helpless to move, unable even to close her eyes. The pock-face saw and understood, gave quick command, and the pack slowed to a walk, gloating upon her agony, prolonging it.

They halted! Something like a flicker of russet flame had shot across the steps between her and them. It was the fox. It stood there, quietly regarding them. And hope flashed up through Jean Meredith, melting the cold terror that had frozen her. Power of motion returned. But she did not try to run. She did not want to run. The cry for vengeance was welling up again. She felt that cry reach out to the fox.

As though it had heard her, the fox turned its head and looked at her. She saw its green eyes sparkle, its white teeth bared as though it smiled.

Its eyes withdrawn, the spell upon the *hung-hutzes* broke. The leader drew pistol, fired upon the fox.

Jean Meredith saw, or thought she saw, the incredible.

Where fox had been, stood now a woman! She was tall, and lithe as a young willow. Jean Meredith could not see her face, but she could see hair of russet-red coiled upon a small and shapely head. A silken gown of russet-red, sleeveless, dropped to the woman's feet. She raised an arm and pointed at the pock-faced leader. Behind him his men were silent, motionless, even as Jean Meredith had been—and it came to her that it was the same ice of terror that held them. Their eyes were fixed upon the woman.

The woman's hand dropped—slowly. And as it dropped, the pock-faced Tibetan dropped with it. He sank to his knees and then upon his hands. He stared into her face, lips drawn back from his teeth like a snarling dog, and there was foam upon his lips. Then he hurled himself upon his men, like a wolf. He sprang upon them howling; he leaped up at their throats, tearing at them with teeth and talons. They milled, squalling rage and bewildered terror. They tried to beat him off—they could not.

There was a flashing of knives. The pock-face lay writhing on the steps, like a dog dying. Still squalling, never looking behind them, his men poured down the steps and away.

Jean Meredith's hands went up, covering her eyes. She dropped them—a fox, all silken russet-red, stood where the woman had been. It was watching her. She saw its green eyes sparkle, its white teeth bared as though it smiled—it began to walk daintily up the steps toward her.

Weakness swept over her; she bent her head, crumpled to her knees, covered again her eyes with shaking hands. She was aware of an unfamiliar fragrance—disturbing, evocative of strange, fleeting images. She heard low, sweet laughter. She heard a soft voice whisper:

"Sister!"

She looked up. A woman's face was bending over her. An exquisite face . . . with sea-green, slanted eyes under a broad white brow . . . with hair of russet-red that came to a small peak in the center of that brow . . . a lock of silvery white shaped like the flame of a candle wavering in the wind . . . a nose long but delicate, the nostrils slightly flaring, daintily . . . a mouth small and red as the royal coral, heart-shaped, lips full, archaic.

Over that exquisite face, like a veil, was faint mockery, a delicate malice that had in them little

of the human. Her hands were white and long and slender. They touched Jean Meredith's heart . . . soothing her, strengthening her, drowning fear and sorrow.

She heard again the sweet voice, lilting, faintly amused—with the alien, half-malicious amusement of one who understands human emotion yet has never felt it, but knows how little it matters:

"You shall have your vengeance—*Sister!*"

The white hands touched her eyes . . . she forgot . . . and forgot . . . and now there was nothing to remember . . . not even herself . . .

It seemed to Jean Meredith that she lay cushioned within soft, blind darkness—illimitable, impenetrable. She had no memories; all that she knew was that she was. She thought: *I am I*. The darkness that cradled her was gentle, kindly. She thought: *I am a spirit still unborn in the womb of night*. But what was *night*...and what was *spirit*? She thought: *I am content—I do not want to be born again*. Again? That meant that she had been born before....a word came to her—Jean. She thought: *I am Jean....but who was Jean?*

She heard two voices speaking. One a woman's, soft and sweet with throbbing undertones like plucked harp strings. She had heard that voice before....before, when she had been Jean. The man's voice was low, filled with tranquillity, human....that was it, the voice held within it a humanness the sweet voice of the woman lacked. She thought: *I, Jean, am human....*

The man said: "Soon she must awaken. The tide of sleep is high on the shore of life. It must not cover it."

The woman answered: "I command that tide. And it has begun to ebb. Soon she will awaken."

He asked: "Will she remember?"

The woman said: "She will remember. But she will not suffer. It will be as though what she remembers had happened to another self of hers. She will pity that self, but it will be to her as though it died when died her husband. As indeed it did. That self bears the sorrow, the pain, the agony. It leaves no legacy of them to her—save memory."

And now it seemed to her that for a time there was a silence....although she knew that time could not exist within the blackness that cradled her.... and what was—time?

The man's voice broke that silence, musingly: "With memory there can be no happiness for her, long as she lives."

The woman laughed, a tingling-sweet mocking chime: "Happiness? I thought you wiser than to cling to that illusion, priest. I give her serenity, which is far better than happiness. Nor did she ask for happiness. She asked for vengeance. And vengeance she shall have."

The man said: "But she does not know who—"

The woman interrupted: "She does know. And I know. And so shall you when you have told her what was wrong from the Tibetan before he died. And if you still do not believe, you will believe when he who is guilty comes here, as come he will—to kill the child."

The man whispered: "*To kill the child!*"

The woman's voice became cold, losing none of its sweetness but edged with menace: "You must not let him have it, priest. Not then. Later, when the word is given you...."

Again the voice grew mocking.... "I contemplate a journey....I would see other lands, who so long have dwelt among these hills....and I would not have my plans spoiled by precipitancy...." Once more Jean Meredith heard the tingling laughter. "Have no fear, priest. *They* will help you—my sisters."

He said, steadily: "I have no fear."

The woman's voice became gentle, all mockery fled. She said:

"I know that, you who have had wisdom and courage to open forbidden doors. But I am bound by a threefold cord—a promise, a vow, and a desire. When a certain time comes, I must surrender much—must lie helpless, bound by that cord. It is then that I shall need you, priest, for this man who will come...."

The voices faded. Slowly the blackness within which she lay began to lighten. Slowly, slowly, a luminous greyness replaced it. She thought, desperately: *I am going to be born! I don't want to be born!* Implacably, the light increased. Now within the greyness was a nimbus of watery emerald. The nimbus became brighter, brighter....

She was lying upon a low bed, in a nest of silken cushions. Close to her was an immense and ancient bronze vessel, like a baptismal font. The hands of thousands of years had caressed it, leaving behind them an ever deepening patina like a soft green twilight. A ray of the sun shone upon it, and where the ray rested, the patina gleamed like a tiny green sun. Upon the sides of the great bowl were strange geometric patterns, archaic, the spirals and meanders of the Lei-wen—the thunder patterns. It stood upon three legs, tripodal....why, it was the ancient ceremonial vessel, the Tang font which Martin had brought home from Yunnan years ago....and she was back home....she had dreamed that she had been in China and that Martin....that Martin....

She sat up abruptly and looked through wide, opened doors into a garden. Broad steps dropped shallowly to an oval pool around whose sides were lithe willows trailing green tendrils in the blue water, wisterias with drooping ropes of blossoms, white and pale azure, and azaleas like flower flames. Rosy lilies lay upon the pool's breast. And at its far end was a small pagoda, fairy-like, built all of tiles of iridescent peacock blue and on each side a stately cypress, as though they were its ministers....why, this was their garden, the garden of the blue pagoda which Martin had copied from that place in Yunnan where lived his friend, the wise old priest....

But there was something wrong. These mountains were not like those of the ranch. They were conical, their smooth bare slopes of rose-red stone circled with trees....they were like huge stone hats with green brims....

She turned again and looked about the room. It was a wide room and a deep one, but how deep she could not see, because the sun streaming in from a high window struck the ancient vessel and made a curtain, veiling it beyond. She could see

that there were beams across its ceiling, mellow with age, carved with strange symbols. She caught glimpses of ivory and of gleaming lacquer. There was a low altar of what seemed green jade, curiously carved and upon which were ceremonial objects of unfamiliar shape, a huge ewer of bronze whose lid was the head of a fox....

A man came toward her, walking out of the shadows beyond the ancient Tang vessel. He was clothed from neck to feet in a silken robe of silvery-blue upon which were embroidered, delicately as though by spiders, Taoist symbols and under them, ghostly in silver threads a fox's head. He was bald, his face heavy, expressionless, skin smooth and faded yellow as some antique parchment. So far as age went he might have been sixty—or three hundred. But it was his eyes that held Jean Meredith. They were large and black and liquid, and prodigiously alive. They were young eyes, belying the agelessness of the heavy face; and it was as though the face was but a mask from which the eyes had drawn all life into themselves. They poured into her strength and calmness and reassurance, and from her mind vanished all vaguenesses, all doubts, all fears. Her mind for the first time since the ambush was clear, crystal clear, her thoughts her own.

She remembered—remembered everything. But it was as though all had happened to another self. She felt pity for that self, but it had left no heritage of sorrow. She was tranquil. The black, youthful eyes poured tranquility into her.

She said: "I know you. You are Yu Ch'ien, the wise priest my husband loved. This is the Temple of the Foxes."

II

"AM YU CH'EN, my daughter." His voice was the man's voice which she had heard when cradled in the darkness..

She tried to rise, then swayed back upon the bed, weakness overcoming her.

He said: "A night and a day, and still another night and half this day you have slept, and now you must eat." He spoke the English words slowly, as one whose tongue had long been stranger to them.

He clapped his hands and a woman slipped by the great vase through the bars of the sunlight. She was ageless as he, with broad shrewd face and tilted sloe-black eyes that were kindly yet very wise. A smock covered her from full breasts to knees, and she was sturdy and strong and brown as though she had been carved from seasoned wood. In her hands was a tray upon which was a bowl of steaming broth and oaten cakes.

The woman sat beside Jean Meredith, lifting her head, resting it against her deep bosom and feeding her like a child, and now Jean saw that herself was naked except for a thin robe of soft

blue silk and that upon it was the moon-silver symbol of the fox.

The priest nodded, his eyes smiled upon her. "Fien-wi will attend you. Soon you will be stronger. Soon I shall return. Then we shall talk."

He passed out of the wide doors. The woman fed her the last of the broth, the last of the little cakes. She left her, and returned with bowls of bronze in which was water hot and cold; undressed her; ministered to her, bathed her and rubbed her; dressed her in fresh silken robes of blue; strapped sandals to her feet, and smiling, left her. Thrice Jean essayed to speak to her, but the woman only shook her head, answering in a lisping dialect no sound of which she recognized.

The sun had moved from the great Tang font. She lay back, lazily. Her mind was limpidly clear; upon it was reflected all through which she had passed, yet it was tranquil, untroubled, like a woodland pool that reflects the storm clouds but whose placid surface lies undisturbed. The things that had happened were only images reflected upon her mind. But under that placid surface was something implacable, adamant-hard, something that would have been bitter did it not know that it was to be satisfied.

She thought over what Martin had told her of Yu Ch'ien. A Chinese whose forefathers had been enlightened rulers ten centuries before the Man of Galilee had been raised upon the cross, who had studied Occidental thought both in England and France, and had found little in it to satisfy his thirst for wisdom; who had gone back to the land of his fathers, embraced at last the philosophy of Lao-Tse, and had withdrawn from the world to an ancient fane in Yunnan known as the Temple of the Foxes, a temple revered and feared and around which strange legends clustered; there to spend his life in meditation and study.

What was it Martin had called him? Ah, yes, a master of secret and forgotten knowledge, a master of illusion. She knew that of all men, Martin had held Yu Ch'ien in profoundest respect, deepest affection....she wondered if the woman she had seen upon the steps had been one of his illusions....if the peace she felt came from him....if he had made sorrow and pain of soul illusions for her . . . and was she thinking the thoughts he had placed in her mind—or her own . . . she wondered dreamily, not much caring...

He came through the doors to her, and again it was as though his eyes were springs of tranquility from which her soul drank deep. She tried to rise, to greet him; her mind was strong but through all her body was languor. He touched her forehead, and the languor fled. He said:

"All is well with you, my daughter. But now we must talk. We will go into the garden."

He clapped his hands. The brown woman, Fien-wi, came at the summons, and with her two blue-smocked men bearing a chair. The woman lifted her, placed her in the chair. The men carried her out of the wide doors, down the shallow steps to the blue pool. She looked behind her as she went.

The Temple was built into the brow of the mountain. It was of brown stone and brown wood. Slender pillars hard bitten by the teeth of the ages held up a curved roof of the peacock blue tiles.

From the wide doors through which she had come a double row of sculptured foxes ran, like Thebes' road of the Sphinxes, half way down to the pool. Over the crest of the mountain crept the ancient steps up which she had stumbled. Where the steps joined the Temple, stood a tree covered all with white blossoms. It wavered in the wind like the flame of a candle.

Strangely was the temple like the head of a fox, its muzzle between the paws of the rows of sculptured foxes, the crest of the mountain its forehead and the white blossoming tree, like the lock of white upon the forehead of the fox of the steps . . . and the white lock upon the forehead of the woman....

They were at the pool. There was a seat cut at the end, facing the blue pagoda. The woman Fien-wi piled the stone with cushions, and as she waited, Jean Meredith saw that there were arms to this seat and that at the end of each was the head of a fox, and that over its back was a tracery of dancing foxes; and she saw, too, that on each side of the seat tiny paths had been cut in stone leading to the water, as though for some small-footed creatures to trot upon and drink.

She was lifted to the stone chair, and sank into the cushions. Except for the seat and the little runways, it was as though she sat beside the pool Martin had built at their California ranch. There, as here, the willows dipped green tendrils into the water; there, as here, drooped ropes of wisteria, pale amethyst and white. And here as there was peace.

Yu Ch'ien spoke: "A stone is thrown into a pool. The ripples spread and break against the shore. At last they cease and the pool is as before. Yet when the stone strikes, as it sinks and while the ripples live, microscopic lives within the pool are changed. But not for long. The stone touches bottom, the pool again becomes calm. It is over, and life for the tiny things is as before."

She said quietly, out of the immense clarity of her mind: "You mean, Yu Ch'ien, that my husband's murder was such a stone."

He went on, as though she had not spoken; "But there is life within life, and over life, and under life—as we know life. And that which happens to the tiny things within the pool may be felt by those beneath and above them. Life is a bubble in which are lesser bubbles which we cannot see, and the bubble we call life is only part of a greater bubble which also we may not see. But sometimes we perceive those bubbles, sometimes glimpse the beauty of the greater, sense the kinship of the lesser . . . and sometimes a lesser life touches ours and then we speak of demons . . . and when the greater ones touch us we name it inspiration from Heaven, an angel speaking through our lips—"

She interrupted, thought crystal clear: "I understand you, Martin's murder was the stone. It would pass with its ripples—but it has disturbed some pool within which it was a lesser pool. Very well, what then?"

He said: "There are places in this world where the veil between it and the other worlds is thin. They can enter. Why it is so, I do not know—but I know it is so. The ancients recognised such

places. They named those who dwelt unseen there the *genii locorum*—literally, the spirits of the places. This mountain, this temple, is such a place. It is why I came to it."

She said: "You mean the fox I saw upon the steps. You mean the woman I thought I saw take the place of that fox, and who drove the Tibetan mad. The fox I asked to help me and to give me revenge, and whom I called *sister*. The woman I thought I saw who whispered to me that I should have revenge and who called me *sister*. Very well, what then?"

He answered: "It is true. The murder of your husband was the stone. Better to have let the ripples die. But there was this place . . . there was a moment . . . and now the ripples cannot die until—"

Again she interrupted, the true thought—or what she believed the true thought—flashing up through her mind like sun-glints from jewels at a clear pool's bottom. "I had denied my God. Whether he exists or does not, I had stripped myself of my armor against those other lives. I did it where and when such other lives, if they exist, could strike. I accept that. And again, what then?"

He said: "You have a strong soul, my daughter."

She answered, with a touch of irony: "While I was within the blackness, before I awakened, I seemed to hear two persons talking, Yu Ch'ien. One had your voice, and the other the voice of the fox woman who called me *sister*. She promised me serenity. Well, I have that. And having it, I am as unhuman as was her voice. Tell me, Yu Ch'ien, whom my husband called master of illusions, was that woman upon the steps one of your illusions, and was her voice another? Does my serenity come from her or from you? I am no child, and I know how easily you could accomplish this, by drugs or by your will while I lay helpless."

He said: "My daughter, if they were illusions—they were not mine. And if they were illusions, then I, like you, am victim to them."

She asked: "You mean you have seen—her?"

He answered: "And her sisters. Many times."

She said shrewdly: "Yet that does not prove her real—she might have passed from your mind to mine."

He did not answer. She asked abruptly: "Shall I live?"

He replied without hesitation. "No."

She considered that for a little, looking at the willow tendrils, the ropes of wisteria. She mused: "I did not ask for happiness, but she gives me serenity. I did not ask for life, so she gives me—vengeance. But I no longer care for vengeance."

He said gravely: "It does not matter. You struck into that other life. You asked, and you were promised. The ripples upon the greater pool cannot cease until that promise is fulfilled."

She considered that, looking at the conical hills. She laughed. "They are like great stone hats with brims of green. What are their faces like, I wonder."

He asked: "Who killed your husband?"

She answered, still smiling at the hatted hills: "Why, his brother, of course."

He asked: "How do you know that?"

She lifted her arms and twined her hands behind her neck. She said, as impersonally as though she read from a book: "I was little more than twenty when I met Martin. Just out of college. He was fifty. But inside—he was a dreaming boy. Oh, I knew he had lots and lots of money. It didn't matter. I loved him—for the boy inside him. He asked me to marry him. I married him."

"Charles hated me from the beginning. Charles is his brother, fifteen years younger. Charles' wife hated me. You see, there was no other besides Charles until I came. If Martin died—well, all his money would go to Charles. They never thought he would marry. For the last ten years Charles had looked after his business—his mines, his investments. I really don't blame Charles for hating me—but he shouldn't have killed Martin."

"We spent our honeymoon out on Martin's ranch. He has a pool and garden just like this, you know. It's just as beautiful, but the mountains around it have snowy caps instead of these stony, green-rimmed ones. And he had a great bronze vessel like that of yours. He told me that he had copied the garden from Yu Ch'ien's, even to the blue pagoda. And that the vessel had a mate in Yu Ch'ien's Temple of the Foxes. And he told me . . . of you . . ."

"Then the thought came to him to return to you and your temple. Martin was a boy—the desire gripped him. I did not care, if it made him happy. So we came, Charles with us as far as Nanking. Hating me, I knew, every mile of the journey. At Nanking—I told Martin I was going to have a baby. I had known it for months—but I hadn't told him because I was afraid he would put off this trip on which he had set his heart. Now I knew I couldn't keep it secret much longer. Martin was so happy! He told Charles, who hated me then more than ever. And Martin made a will. If Martin should die, Charles was to act as trustee for me and the child, carry on the estate as before, with his share of the income increased. All the balance, and there are millions, was left to me and the coming baby. There was also a direct bequest of half a million to Charles."

"Martin read the will to him. I was present. So was Kenwood, Martin's secretary. I saw Charles turn white, but outwardly he was pleasantly acquiescent, concerned only lest something really might happen to his brother. But I guessed what was in his heart."

"Kenwood liked me, and he did not like Charles. He came to me one night in Nanking, a few days before we were to start for Yunnan. He tried to dissuade me from the journey. He was a bit vague about reasons, talked of my condition, hard traveling and so on, but that was ridiculous. At last I asked him point-blank—why? Then he said that Charles was secretly meeting a Chinese captain, by name—Li-kong. I asked what of it, he had a right to pick his friends. Kenwood said Li-kong was suspected of being in touch with certain outlaws operating in Szechwan and Yunnan, and of receiving and disposing of the best of their booty. Kenwood said: 'If both you and Martin die before the baby is born, Charles will inherit every-

thing. He's next of kin and the only one, for you have nobody.' Kenwood said: 'You're going up into Yunnan. How easy to send word to one of these bands to look out for you. And then brother Charles would have it all. Of course, there's no use saying anything to your husband. He trusts everybody, and Charles most of all. All that would happen would be my dismissal.'

"And of course that was true. But I couldn't believe Charles, for all he hated me so, would do this to Martin. There were two of us and Kenwood and a nice Scotch woman I found at Nanking, a Miss Mackenzie, who agreed to come along to look after me in event of my needing it. There were twenty of us in all—the others Chinese boys, thoroughly good, thoroughly dependable. We came North slowly, unhurriedly. I said that Martin was a boy inside. No need to tell you again of his affection for you. And he loved China—the old China. He said it lived now only a few places, and Yunnan was first. And he had it in his mind that our baby should be born—here—"

She sat silent, then laughed. "And so it will be. But not as Martin dreamed . . ." She was silent again. She said, as though faintly puzzled: "It was not—human—to laugh at that!" She went on serenely: "We came on and on slowly. *Sampans* on the rivers, and I by litter mostly. Always easily, easily . . . because of the baby. Then two weeks ago Kenwood told me that he had word we were to be attacked at a certain place. He had been years in China, knew how to get information and I knew he had watched and cajoled and threatened and bribed ever since we had entered the hills. He said he had arranged a counter-attack that would catch the trappers in their own trap. He cursed Charles dreadfully, saying he was behind it. He said that if we could only get to Yu Ch'ien we would be safe. Afterwards he told me that he must have been sold wrong information. The counter-attack had drawn blank. I told him he was letting his imagination run away with him."

"We went on. Then came the ambush. It wasn't a matter of ransom. It was a matter of wiping us out. They gave us no chance. So it must have been that we were worth more to them dead than alive. That realization came to me as I stood at the door of my tent and saw Martin cut down, poor Mackenzie fall. Kenwood could have escaped as I did—but he died to give me time to get away . . ."

"Yu Ch'ien, what have you done to me?" asked Jean Meredith, dreamily. "I have seen my husband butchered . . . I have seen a man give up his life for me . . . and still I feel no more emotion than as though they had been reeds under the sickle . . . what have you done to me, Yu Ch'ien?"

He answered: "Daughter—when you are dead, and all those now living are dead—will it matter?"

She answered, shaking her head: "But—I am *not* dead! Nor are those now living *dead*. And I *should* rather be *human*, Yu Ch'ien. And *suffer*."

He said: "It may not be, my daughter."

"I wish I could feel," she said. "Good God, but I wish I could feel . . ."

She said: "That is all. Kenwood threw himself in front of me. I ran. I came to wide steps. I

climbed them—up and up. I saw a fox—I saw a woman where I had seen the fox—”

He said: “You saw a Tibetan, a half-caste, who threw himself upon those who followed you, howling like a mad dog. You saw that Tibetan cut down by the knives of his men, I came with my men before he died. We brought him here. I searched his dying mind. He told me that they had been hired to wipe out your party by a Shensi leader of *hung-hutzes*. And that he had been promised not only the loot of your party if all were slain, but a thousand taels besides. And that when he asked who guaranteed this sum, this leader, in his cups, had told him the Captain Li-kong.”

She cupped her chin in hand, looked out over the blue pool to the pagoda. She said at last: “So Kenwood was right! And I am right. It *was* Charles . . .”

She said: “I feel a little, Yu Ch'ien. But what I feel is not pleasant. It is hate, Yu Ch'ien . . .”

She said: “I am only twenty-four. It is rather young to die, Yu Ch'ien, isn't it? But then—what was it your woman's voice said while I was in the darkness? That the self of mine whom I would pity died when Martin did? She was right, Yu Ch'ien—or you were. And I think I will not be sorry to join that other self.”

The sun was sinking. An amethyst veil dropped over the conical mountains. Suddenly they seemed to flatten, to become transparent. The whole valley between the peaks grew luminously crystalline. The blue pagoda shone as though made of dark sapphires behind which little suns burned. She sighed: “It is very beautiful, Yu Ch'ien. I am glad to be here—until I die.”

There was a patter of feet beside her. A fox came trotting down one of the carven runways. It looked up at her fearlessly with glowing green eyes. Another slipped from the cover of the pool and another and another. They lapped the blue water fearlessly, eyes glinting swift side-glances at her, curiously....

The days slipped by her, the weeks—a month. Each day she sat in the seat of the foxes beside the pool, watching the willows trail their tendrils, the lilies like great rosy pearls open and close and die and be reborn on the pool's blue breast; watching the crystalline green dusks ensorcell the conical peaks, and watching the foxes that came when these dusks fell.

They were friendly now, the foxes—knew her, sat beside her, studying her; but never did she see the lithe fox with the lock of white between its slanting green eyes. She grew to know the brown woman Fien-wi and the sturdy servitors. And from the scattered villages pilgrims came to the shrine; they looked at her fearfully, shyly, as she sat on the seat of the foxes, prostrating themselves before her as though she were some spirit to be placated by worship.

And each day was as the day before, and she thought: *Without sorrow, without fear, without gladness, without hope there is no difference between the days, and therefore what difference does it make if I die tomorrow or a year hence?*

Whatever the anodyne that steeped her soul—whether from vague woman of the steps or from

Yu Ch'ien—it had left her with no emotion. Except that she knew she must bear it, she had no feeling even toward her unborn baby. Once, indeed, she had felt a faint curiosity. That this wise priest of the Foxes' Temple had his own means of learning what he desired of the outer world, she was well aware.

She said: “Does Charles know as yet of the ambush—know that I am still alive?”

He answered: “Not yet. The messengers who were sent to Li-kong did not reach him. It will be weeks before he knows.”

She said: “And then he will come here. Will the baby be born when he comes, Yu Ch'ien?”

He answered: “Yes.”

“And shall I be alive, Yu Ch'ien?”

He did not answer. She laughed.

It was one twilight, in the middle of the Hour of the Dog, that she turned to him, sitting in the garden beside the pool.

“My time has come, Yu Ch'ien. The child stirs.”

They carried her into the temple. She lay upon the bed, while the brown woman stooped over her, ministering to her, helping her. The only light in the temple chamber came from five ancient lanterns of milky jade through whose thin sides the candles gleamed, turning them into five small moons. She felt little pain. She thought: *I owe that to Yu Ch'ien, I suppose.* And the minutes fled by until it was the Hour of the Boar.

She heard a scratching at the temple door. The priest opened it. He spoke softly, one word, a word often on his lips, and she knew it meant “patience”. She could see through the opened door into the garden. There were small globular green lights all about, dozens of them, like gnome lanterns.

She said drowsily: “My little foxes wait. Let them enter, Yu Ch'ien.”

“Not yet, my daughter.”

The Hour of the Boar passed. Midnight passed. There was a great silence in the temple. It seemed to her that all the temple was waiting, that even the unfaltering light of the five small moons on the altar was waiting. She thought: *Even the child is waiting . . . and for what?*

And suddenly a swift agony shook her and she cried out. The brown woman held tight her hands that tried to beat the air. The priest called, and into the room came four of the sturdy servants of the temple. They carried large vessels in which was water steaming hot and water which did not steam and so, she reasoned idly, must be cold. They kept their backs to her, eyes averted.

The priest touched her eyes, stroked her flanks, and the agony was gone as swiftly as it had come. She watched the servants pour the waters into the ancient Tang font and slip away, backs still turned to her, faces averted.

She had not seen the door open, but there was a fox in the room. It was ghostly in the dim light of the jade lamps, yet she could see it stepping daintily toward her . . . a vixen, lithe and graceful as a woman . . . with slanted eyes, sea-green, brilliant as jewels . . . the fox of the steps whom she had called *sister*....

And now she was looking up into a woman's face. An exquisite face with sea-green, slanted eyes under a broad white brow, whose hair of russet-red came to a small peak in the center of that brow, and above the peak a lock of silvery white . . . the eyes gazed into hers, and although they caressed her, there was in them a faint mockery, a delicate malice.

The woman was naked. Although Jean Meredith could not wrest her own eyes from the slanting green ones, she could see the curve of delicate shoulders, the rounded breasts, the slender hips. It was as though the woman stood poised upon her own breasts, without weight, upon airy feet. There was a curious tingling coolness in her breasts . . . more pleasant than warmth . . . and it was as though the woman were sinking into her, becoming a part of her. The face came nearer . . . nearer . . . the eyes were now close to hers, and mockery and malice gone from them . . . in them was only gentleness and promise . . . she felt cool lips touch hers . . .

The face was gone. She was sinking, sinking, unresistingly . . . gratefully . . . through a luminous greyness . . . then into a soft blind darkness . . . she was being cradled by it, sinking ever deeper and deeper. She cried out once, as though frightened: *Martin!* Then she cried again, voice vibrant with joy: *Martin!*

One of the five moon lamps upon the jade altar darkened. Went out.

The brown woman was prostrate upon her face beside the bed. The priest touched her with his foot. He said: "Prepare. Be swift." She bent over the still body.

There was a movement beside the altar. Four foxes stepped daintily from its shadows toward the Tang font. They were vixens, and they came like graceful women, and the coat of each was silken russet-red, their eyes brilliant, sea-green and slanting, and upon each forehead was a lock of silvery white. They drew near the brown woman, watching her.

The priest walked to the doors and threw them open. Into the temple slipped fox after fox . . . a score, two score . . . the temple filled with them. They ringed the ancient font, squatting, red tongues lolling, eyes upon the bed.

The priest walked to the bed. In his hand was a curiously shaped, slender knife of bronze, double-edged, sharp as a surgeon's knife. The brown woman threw herself again upon the floor. The priest leaned over the bed, began with a surgeon's deftness and delicacy to cut. The four vixens drew close, watching every movement—

Suddenly there wailed through the temple the querulous crying of a new-born child.

The priest walked from the bed toward the font. He held the child in his hands, and hands and child were red with blood. The vixens walked beside him. The foxes made way for them, closing their circles as they passed. The four vixens halted, one at each of the font's four sides. They did not sit. They stood with gaze fastened upon the priest.

The priest ringed the font, bending before

each of the four vixens, holding out the child until each had touched it with her tongue. He lifted the child by the feet, held it dangling head down, high above his head, turning so that all the other foxes could see it.

He plunged it five times into the water of the font.

As abruptly as the first moon lantern had gone out, so darkened the other four.

There was a rustling, the soft patter of many pads. Then silence.

Yu Ch'ien called. There was the gleam of lanterns borne by the servants. The brown woman raised herself from the floor. He placed the child in her hands. He said: "It is finished—and it is begun. Care for her."

Thus was born the daughter of Jean and Martin Meredith in the ancient Temple of the Foxes. Born in the heart of the Hour of the Fox, so called in those parts of China where the ancient beliefs still live because it is at the opposite pole of the Hour of the Horse, which animal at certain times and at certain places, has a magic against which the magic of the Fox may not prevail.

III

THE Home of Heavenly Anticipations honored with its presence Peking, not yet at that time renamed Peiping. It was hidden in the heart of the Old City. The anticipations discussed there were usually the reverse of heavenly—or, if not, then dealing with highly unorthodox realms of beatitude.

But except for its patrons none ever knew what went on within its walls. There was never any leakage of secrets though those walls. Peculiarly intimate information could be obtained at the Home of Heavenly Anticipations—so long as it did not pertain to its patrons.

It was, in fact, a clearing house for enterprises looked upon with a certain amount of disfavor even by many uncivilized countries: enterprises such as blackmail, larceny on the grand scale, smuggling, escapes, piracies, removal of obstacles by assassination and so on. Its abbots collected rich tithes from each successful operation in return for absolute protection from interruption, eavesdropping and spies, and for the expert and thoroughly trustworthy advices upon any point of any enterprise which needed to be cleared up before action.

Prospective members of the most exclusive of London's clubs were never scanned with such completeness as were applicants for the right to enter the Home of Heavenly Anticipations—and one had to be a rather complete scoundrel to win that right. But to those who sought such benefits as it offered, they were worth all the difficulty in securing them.

Charles Meredith sat in one of its rooms, three

weeks to a night from the birth of Jean Meredith's baby. He was not a member, but it was the privilege of accredited patrons to entertain guests to whom secrecy was as desirable as to themselves—or who might prove refractory.

It was a doubtful privilege for these guests, although they were not aware of it, because it was always quite possible that they might never appear again in their usual haunts. In such event it was almost impossible to trace them back to the Home of Heavenly Anticipations. Always, on their way to it, they had been directed to leave their vehicle, coolie-carriage or what not at a certain point and to wait until another picked them up. Beyond that point they were never traced. Or if their bodies were later found, it was always under such circumstances that no one could point a finger at the Home of Heavenly Anticipations, which was as expert on alibis for corpses as for crooks.

Although he knew nothing of this, Charles Meredith was uneasy. For one thing, he had a considerable sum of money in his pocket—a very considerable sum. To be explicit, fifty thousand dollars. For another thing, he had not the slightest idea of where he was.

He had dismissed his hotel coolie at a designated point, had been approached by another who gave the proper word of recognition, had been whisked through street after street, then through a narrow alley, then through a door opening into a winding passage, thence into a plain reception hall where a bowing Chinese had met him and led him to the room. He had seen no one, and he heard no sound. Under the circumstances, he appreciated privacy—but damn it, there was a limit! And where was Li-kong?

He got up and walked about nervously. It gave him some satisfaction to feel the automatic holstered under his left arm-pit. He was tall, rather rangy and his shoulders stooped a little. He had clear eyes whose grey stood out a bit startlingly from his dark face; a good forehead, a somewhat predatory beaked nose; his worst feature, his mouth, which hinted self-indulgence and cruelty. Seemingly an alert, capable American man of affairs, not at all one who would connive at the murder of his own brother.

He turned at the opening of the door. Li-kong came in. Li-kong was a graduate of an American college. His father had cherished hopes of a high diplomatic career, with his American training as part of its foundation. He had repaid it by learning in exhaustive detail the worst of American life. This, grafted to his natural qualifications, had given him high place in the Home of Heavenly Anticipations and among its patrons.

He was in the most formal of English evening dress, looked completely the person his father had hoped he would be instead of what he actually was—without principles, morals, mercy or compunction whatever.

Meredith's nervousness found vent in an irritable, "You've been a hell of a long time getting here, Li-kong!"

The eyes of the Chinese flickered, but he answered urbanely: "Bad news flies fast. Good news is slow. I am neither early nor late."

Meredith asked suspiciously: "What the hell do you mean by that?"

Li-kong said, eyes watchful: "Your honorable elder brother has ascended the dragon."

Meredith's grey eyes glittered. The cruelty stood out on his mouth, unmasked. Li-kong said before he could speak: "All with him, even his unworthy servants, ascended at the same time. All except—" He paused.

Meredith's body tightened, his head thrust forward. He asked in a thin voice: "Except?"

The eyes of the Chinese never left him. He said: "When you rebuked me a moment ago for slowness, I answered that I was neither early nor late. I must therefore bear good news and bad—"

The American interrupted: "Damn you, Li-kong, who got away?"

The Chinese answered: "Your brother's wife." Meredith's face whitened, then blackened with fury. He whispered: "*Christ!*"

He roared: "So you bungled it!" His hand twitched up to the gun under his arm-pit, then dropped. He asked: "Where is she?"

The Chinese must have seen that betraying movement, but he gave no sign. He answered: "She fled to the Temple of the Foxes—to your brother's old friend, the priest Yu Ch'ien."

The other snarled: "What were your bunglers about, to let her go? Why didn't they go after her?"

"They did go after her! Of what happened thereafter, you shall hear—when you have paid me my money, my friend."

"Paid you!" Meredith's fury mastered him at this. "With the bitch alive? I'll see you in hell before you get a cent from me."

The Chinese said calmly: "But since then she has also ascended the dragon in the footsteps of her lord. She died in childbirth."

"They both are dead—" Meredith sank into the chair, trembling like one from whom tremendous strain has lifted. "Both dead—"

The Chinese watched him, malicious anticipation in his eyes. "But the child—lived!" he said.

For a long minute the American sat motionless, looking at him. And now he did not lose control. He said coldly: "So you have been playing with me, have you? Well, now listen to me—you get nothing until the child has followed its father and mother. Nothing! And if it is in your mind to blackmail me, remember you can bring no charge against me without sending yourself to the executioner. Think over that, you leering yellow ape!"

The Chinese lighted a cigarette. He said mildly: "Your brother is dead, according to plan. His wife is dead through that same plan, even though she did not die when the others did. There was nothing in the bargain concerning the child. And I do not think you could reach the child without me." He smiled. "Is it not said, of two brothers, he who thinks himself the invulnerable one—that is the fool?"

Meredith said nothing, eyes bleak on him. Li-kong went on: "Also, I have information to impart, advice to give—necessary to you if you determine to go for the child. As you must—if you want her. And finally—is it not written in the *Yih King*, the Book of Changes, that a man's

mind should have many entrances but only one exit! In this house the saying is reversed. It has only one entrance but many exits—and the door-keeper of each one of them is death."

Again he paused, then said: "Think over that, you welching white brother-killer!"

The American quivered. He sprang up, reaching for his gun. Strong hands grasped his elbows, held him helpless. Li-kong sauntered to him, drew out the automatic, thrust it into his own pocket. The hands released Meredith. He looked behind him. Two Chinese stood there. One held a crimson bow-string, the other a double-edged short-sword.

"Two of the deaths that guard the exits." Li-kong's voice was courtesy itself. "You may have your choice. I recommend the sword—it is swifter."

Ruthless Meredith was, and no coward, but he recognized here a ruthlessness complete as his own. "You win," he said. "I'll pay."

"And now," smiled Li-kong.

Meredith drew out the bundle of notes and passed them to him. The Chinese counted them and nodded. He spoke to the two executioners and they withdrew. He said very seriously: "My friend, it is well for you I recognize that insults by a younger people have not the same force that they would have if spoken by one of my own race, so much older than yours. In the *Yih King* it is written that we must not be confused by similitude, that the superior man places not the same value upon the words of a child as he does upon those of a grown man, although the words be identical. It is well also for you that I feel a certain obligation. Not personally, but because an unconsidered factor has caused a seed sown in this house to bring forth a deformed blossom. It is," continued Li-kong, still very seriously, "a reflection upon its honor—"

He smiled at that, and said, "Or rather, its efficiency. I suggest, therefore, that we discuss the matter without heat or further recrimination of any kind."

Meredith said: "I am sorry I said what I did, Li-kong. It was childish temper. I apologize."

The Chinese bowed, but he did not take the hand the other extended. Nor did he recall his own words. He said: "The child is at the Temple of the Foxes. In Kansu, it is an extremely sacred shrine. She is in charge of Yu Ch'ien, who is not only wise but powerful, and in addition was your honorable late brother's devoted friend. If Yu Ch'ien suspects, then you will have great difficulty in adding to your brother's and your sister-in-law's happiness in Heaven by restoring to them their daughter. You may assume that Yu Ch'ien does suspect—and knows."

Meredith asked incredulously: "Why should he suspect? How could he know?"

Li-kong tapped his cigarette thoughtfully before he answered: "The priest is very wise. Also, like myself, he has had the advantage of contact with your admirable civilization. The woman was with him for weeks, and so he must know who would benefit by the—ah, expungement of your revered relatives. He might think it highly suspicious that those responsible for the regrettable affair did not

pursue the custom of holding the principals for ransom instead of—ah, expunging them on the spot. Naturally, he would ask himself why. Finally, Yu Ch'ien is locally reported to have sources of information not open to other men—I mean living men. The dead," observed Li-kong sardonically, "of course know everything."

Meredith said contemptuously: "What do you mean? Spiritism, divination—that rot?"

Li-kong considered pensively, answered at last: "No—not exactly that. Something closer, rather, to the classical idea of communion with elemental intelligences, nature spirits, creatures surviving from an older world than man's—but still of earth. Something like the spirits that answered from the oaks of Dodona, or that spoke to the Sybil in the grotto of Cumae, or in more modern times appeared in, and instructed Joan of Arc from, the branches of the *arbre fée*, the fairy tree of Domrémy."

Meredith laughed. "Good God! And this—from you!"

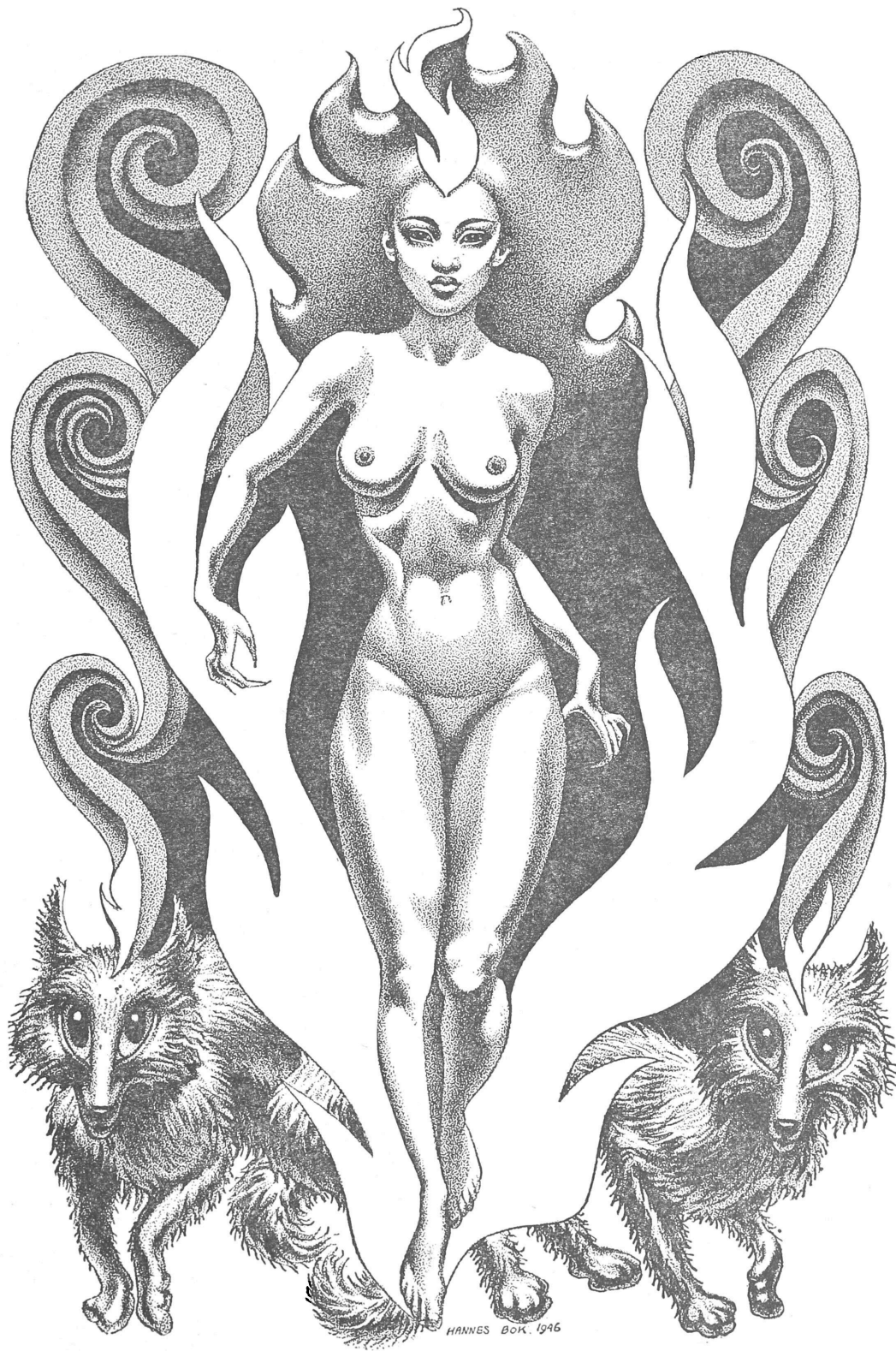
Li-kong said imperturbably: "This from me! I am—what I am. I believe in nothing. Yet I tell you that I would not go up those steps to the Temple of the Foxes for all the gold you could give me. Not—now!"

Meredith thought: *He is trying to frighten me. The yellow dog is trying to keep me from the temple. Why?* He spoke only the last word of the thought: "Why?"

The Chinese answered: "China is old. The ancient beliefs are still strong. There are, for example, the legends of the fox women. The fox women are nature spirits. Intelligences earthy but not human—akin to those in Dodona's oaks, Cumae's grotto, Joan of Arc's fairy tree. Believed in—especially in Kansu. These—let us say spirits—have certain powers far exceeding the human. Bear with me while I tell you of a few of these powers. They can assume two earthly shapes only—that of a fox and that of a beautiful woman. There are fox men, too, but the weight of the legends are upon the women. Since for them time does not exist, they are mistresses of time. To those who come under their power, they can cause a day to seem like a thousand years, or a thousand years like a day. They can open the doors to other worlds—worlds of terror, worlds of delight. If such worlds are illusions, they do not seem so to those for whom they are opened. The fox women can make or mar journeys."

Meredith thought: *Come, now we're getting down to it.*

The Chinese went quietly on: "They can create other illusions. Phantoms, perhaps—but if so, phantoms whose blows maim or kill. They are capricious, bestowing good fortune or ill regardless of the virtue or the lack of it of the recipient. They are peculiarly favorable to women with child. They can, by invitation, enter a woman, passing through her breasts or beneath her finger nails. They can enter an unborn child, or rather a child about to be born. In such cases, the mother dies—nor is the manner of birth the normal one. They cannot oust the soul of the child, but they can dwell beside it, influencing it. Quaint fancies, my friend, in none of which I have be-



lief. Yet because of them nothing could induce me to climb the steps to the Temple of the Foxes."

Meredith thought: *He's trying to frighten me away! What the hell does he think I am—to be frightened by such superstitious drivel?* He said, in that thin voice with which he spoke when temper was mastering him: "What's your game, Li-kong? Another double-cross? You're trying to tell me that if I were you, I wouldn't go to the temple for the brat. Why?"

The Chinese said: "My friend, I have played the game with you. I do not say that if I were you, I would not go. I say that if you were I, you would not. A quite different thing."

The other swung clenched fist down upon the table. "Don't tell me you expect me to take seriously that farrago of nonsense! You don't expect me to give up now because of a yellow—" He checked himself abruptly.

The Chinese completed the sentence politely: "Because of a yellow man's superstition! No, but let me point out a few rather disquieting things. The Temple of the Foxes is believed to be the home of five of these fox women. Five—spirits—who are sisters. Three messengers were sent me with the news of the ambush. The first should have reached me within three weeks after it happened. He has vanished. The second was despatched with other news a week later. He too vanished. But the third, bearing the news of the death of your brother's wife, the birth of the child, came as on the wings of the wind. Why the failure of the first two? Because someone desired to keep you in ignorance until after that birth? Who?"

"Again, no word has come from Kansu, except by this messenger, of the attack on your brother's party. This, my friend, places you in a dilemma. You cannot betray your knowledge of his death without subjecting yourself to questioning as to how that knowledge came to you. You cannot, therefore, send for the child. You must yourself go—upon some pretext. I think that whoever sped the third messenger on his way intends that you shall go—yourself. Why?"

Meredith struck the table again. "I'll go!"

"Third," continued Li-kong, "my messenger said that the woman who fled ran up the steps of the Temple of the Foxes. And that when they were almost upon her—a fox stood between her and them. And that fox changed into a woman who changed their leader into a mad dog. At which—they ran. So I think," said Li-kong meditatively, "would I have run!"

Meredith said nothing, but his hand beat steadily on the table and the grey eyes were furious.

"You are thinking," said the Chinese, "The yellow dogs! Of course they would run! Filled with rum or opium! Of course!"

It was precisely what he had been thinking, but Meredith made no answer.

"And finally," said Li-kong, "your brother's wife died when the child was born—"

"Because, I suppose, the fox bitch crawled into her!" jeered Meredith, and leaning back, whined thin, high-pitched laughter.

The Chinese lost for a moment his calm, half arose, then dropped back. He said patiently: "If

you go up the steps—ride a horse. Preferably an English horse that has hunted foxes."

He lighted another cigarette. "But that is superstition. Nevertheless, if you go, take two men with you as free from taint—as you are. I know two such men. One is a German, the other French. Bold men and hard men. Travel alone, the three of you, as far as you can. At all times keep as few Chinese with you as possible. When you go to the temple, go up the steps alone. Take no Chinese with you there." He said gravely: "I vouch for these two men. Better still, the Home of Heavenly Anticipations vouches for them. They will want money, of course."

Meredith asked: "How much?"

"I don't know. They're not cheap. Probably five thousand dollars at most."

Meredith thought: *Here's what he's been leading up to. It's a trap!*

Again it was as though Li-kong had read his thoughts. He said very deliberately: "Meredith, listen to me! I want nothing more from you nor through you. I have not spoken to these men. They do not know, nor will they know from me, anything of that transaction for which you have just paid. I am through with it. I am through with you! I do not like you. I hope never to see you again. Is that plain American talk?"

Meredith said, as deliberately: "I like it. Go on."

"All that they need know is that you are anxious about your brother. When in due time during your journey you discover that he and his wife are dead, and that there is a child, you will naturally want to bring that child back with you. If you are denied the child, and killing is necessary, they will kill. That is all. I will put you in touch with these two men. And I will see to it that none with whom I have relations embarrass you on your way to Kansu, nor on your way back—if you come back. Except for that obligation of which I have spoken, I would not do even this. I would not lift a finger to help you. After you leave this house, you shall be to me as though you never had been. I want nothing to do with Yu Ch'ien and those who go to the Temple of the Foxes. If we should meet again—never speak to me! Do not show you have known me! Never speak to me, never write to me, do not think of me. I am through with you! Is that clear?"

Meredith nodded, smiling. He thought: *I was wrong about him wanting to keep me from the place. The yellow rat is frightened . . . he believes in his own bogies! America and everything else couldn't knock the superstition out of him!*

The thought amused him. It gave him a contemptuous tolerance of Li-kong, a pleasant knowledge of superiority. He said, not bothering to keep the contempt from his voice: "Clearer than you know, Li-kong. Where do I meet your friends?"

"They can be at your hotel at one, if it suits you."

"It suits me. Their names?"

"They will tell you. They will bear credentials from me."

Li-kong arose. He stood beside the door, bowing courteously. Meredith passed through. They

went along another passage and through a winding alley out into a street. It was not the same street from which he had entered. Nor did he recognize it. A coolie-car waited. Li-kong bowed him into it.

"May our shadows never touch again," said Li-kong ceremoniously. He added, for the first time menacingly: "For your health."

He turned and passed into the alley. The coolie broke into a swift trot, and away.

IV

IT was mid afternoon a month later that he rode out of the green glen and looked up the first steep flight of the ancient steps to the Temple of the Foxes. Riding beside him were von Brenner and Lascelles, the two bold and hard men Li-kong had recommended. They were all of that, but they were also discreet men. They had accepted without comment his explanation of seeking news of his brother, had been properly sympathetic and had asked him no embarrassing questions. Both could speak the Mandarin as well as several of the dialects. Lascelles knew Kansu, was even familiar with the locality in which was the Temple of the Foxes.

Meredith had thought it wise to make inquiries at various places through which he knew Martin had passed, and here the German and the Frenchman acted as his interpreters. When they reported that at these points his brother's party had been in excellent health, they did so with every outward evidence of belief that such tidings were welcome to him.

Either they were excellent actors or Li-kong had kept faith with him and told them nothing beyond what had been agreed. Confidence in the second possibility however had been somewhat disturbed shortly after entering Kansu. The Frenchman had said he thought, somewhat too casually, that if it was desirable to get the temple without passing through any village within a day's march, he knew a way. He added that while undoubtedly the temple's priest would know they were coming, he would expect them to follow the usual route. Therefore, he could possibly be taken by surprise.

Meredith smelled a trap. To accept the suggestion was to admit that the temple had been the real object of his journey, the reason he had given a subterfuge, and the anxious inquiries he had made along the line of march a blind. He answered sharply that there was no reason for any surprise visit, that the priest Yu Ch'ien, a venerable scholar, was an old friend of his brother, and that if the party had reached him there was no further cause for anxiety. Why did Lascelles think he desired any secrecy in his search? The Frenchman replied politely that if he had

known of such friendship the thought would not have occurred to him, of course.

As a matter of fact, Meredith felt no more fear of Yu Ch'ien than he did of Li-kong's fox woman. Whenever he thought of how the Chinese had tried to impress him with that yellow Mother Goose yarn, he felt a contemptuous amusement that more than compensated him for the humiliation of having been forced to pay the blood money. He had often listened to Martin extoll Yu Ch'ien's wisdom and virtues, but that only proved what a complete impractical ass Martin had been . . . gone senile prematurely, in brain at least . . . that was plain enough when he married that gold-digger young enough to be his daughter . . . no longer the brother he had known . . . who could tell what he might have done next . . . some senility which would have brought ruin to them all . . . a senile crazy brain in Martin's still sound body, that was all . . . if Martin had been suffering from some agonizing and incurable disease and had asked him to put him out of his misery, he would certainly have done so . . . well, what was the difference between that and what he had done? That the girl and her brat should also have to suffer was too bad . . . but it had been made necessary by Martin's own senility.

Thus he justified himself. At the same time there was no reason why he should take these two men into his confidence.

What he should do with the brat when he had it was not quite clear. It was only two months old—and it was a long journey back to Peking. There must be some woman taking care of it at the temple. He would arrange that she go with them to Peking. If some accident happened, or if the child caught something or other on the way back—that would not be his fault. Her proper place, obviously, was with her fathers' family. Not in a heathen temple back of nowhere in China. Nobody could blame him for wanting to bring her back . . . even if anything did happen to her.

But on second thought, not so good. He would have to take back proof that this child was theirs. Proof of birth. It would be better to bring her alive to Peking . . . even better, it might be, if it lived until he had taken it back to the States and the whole matter of trusteeship and guardianship had been legally adjusted. There was plenty of time. And he would have his half-million, and the increased percentage from the estate to tide him over the gap between now and until—something happened, and the whole estate would be his. He thought callously: *Well, the brat is insured as far as Peking at any rate.*

They had passed through a village that morning. The headman had met them, and in answer to the usual questioning, had given a complete account of the massacre, of Jean's escape, of her death later at the temple and of the child's birth. It was so complete, even to the dates, that he felt a stirring of faint suspicion. It was a little as though the story had been drilled into this man. And now and then he would call this one or that among the villagers for corroboration. But Charles had shown the proper shades of grief, and desire to punish the killers. And Brenner and

Lascalles had exerted themselves to comfort him in orthodox fashion.

He had said at last: "The first thing to do is get the baby safely back to Peking. I can get capable white nurses there. I'll have to find a woman here to look after it until we reach Peking. I want to get the child to the States and in my wife's care as soon as I can. And I want to start the machinery going to punish my brother's murderers—although I realize that's a forlorn hope."

They had agreed with him that it was most desirable to get the child to his wife in quickest possible time, and that hope of punishing the killers was indeed a forlorn one.

And now he stood looking up the ancient steps at whose end was the child. He said: "You couldn't ride a horse up that, unless it was a circus horse. And these are not."

Lascalles smiled. "It is impossible to ride to the temple. There are steeper flights than this. And there is no trail or other road. We must walk."

Meredith said suspiciously: "You seem to know a lot about this place, Lascalles. Ever been to the temple?"

The Frenchman answered: "No, but I have talked to those who have."

Meredith grimmed. "Li-kong told me to take a horse. He said the fox women were afraid of it."

Brenner laughed. "*Die Fuch-Damen!* I haf always wanted to see one. Joost as I always wanted to see one of those bowmen of Mons they haf spoken so highly of in the War. Yah! I would like to try a bullet on the bowmen, but I would haf other treatment for the fox women. Yah!"

Lascalles said non-committally: "It's hard to get some things out of the mind of a Chinese."

Brenner said to Meredith: "There is one question I haf to ask. How far iss it that we go in getting this child? Suppose this priest thinks it better you do not haf it? How far iss it that we go to persuade him, hein?" He added meditatively: "The headman said that there are with the priest three women and four men." He said even more meditatively: "That headsman he wass very full of detail. Yah—he knew a lot. I do not like that—quite."

Lascalles nodded, saying nothing, looking at Meredith interrogatively.

Meredith said: "I do not see for what reason or upon what grounds Yu Ch'ien can deny me the child. I am its uncle, its natural guardian. Its father, my brother so designated me in the event of his death. Well, he is dead. If the priest refuses to give it up peaceably I would certainly be justified in using force to secure it. If the priest were hurt—we would not be to blame. If his men attacked us and were hurt—we would be blameless. One way or another—I take the child."

Lascalles said somewhat grimly: "If it comes to fighting, we ride back along that way I told you of. We will go through no village within a day's journey from here. It will not be healthy for us in Kansu—the speed at which we must go will not be healthy for the child."

Meredith said: "I am sure we'll have no trouble with Yu Ch'ien."

They had brought a fourth horse with them, a

sturdy beast with wide Chinese saddle such as a woman rides. They tethered the four horses and began to mount the steps. At first they talked, then their voices seemed to be absorbed in the silence, to grow thin. They stopped talking.

The tall pines watched them as they passed—the crouching shrubs watched them. They saw no one, heard nothing—but gradually they became as watchful as the pines and bushes, alert, hands gripping the butts of their pistols as though the touch gave them confidence. They came over the brow of the hill and the sweat was streaming from them as it streams from horses frightened by something they sense but can neither see nor hear.

It was as though they had passed out of some peril-haunted jungle into safety. They still said nothing to each other, but they straightened, drew deep breaths, and their hands fell from their pistols. They looked down upon the peacock-tiled roof of the Temple of the Foxes and upon its blue pool of peace. A man sat beside it on a stone seat. As they watched him, he arose and walked toward the temple. At each side of him went a pair of what seemed russet-red dogs. Suddenly they saw that these were not dogs but foxes.

They came down over the brow of the hill to the rear of the temple. In its brown stone there was no door, only six high windows that seemed to watch them come. They saw no one. They skirted the temple and reached its front. The man they had seen at the pool stood there, as though awaiting them. The foxes were gone.

The three halted as one, involuntarily. Meredith had expected to see an old, old man—gentle, a little feeble, perhaps. The face he saw was old, no doubt of that—but the eyes were young and prodigiously alive. Large and black and liquid, they held his. He was clothed in a symbolized robe of silvery blue on whose breast in silver was a fox's head.

Meredith thought: *What if he isn't what I expected!* He shook his head impatiently, as though to get rid of some numbness. He stepped forward, hand outstretched. He said: "I am Charles Meredith. You are Yu Ch'ien—my brother's friend—"

The priest said: "I have been expecting you, Charles Meredith. You already know what happened. The village headman mercifully took from me the burden of delivering to you the first blossom of sorrowful knowledge."

Meredith thought: *How the devil did he know that? The village is half a day away. We came swiftly, and no runner could have reached here before us.*

The priest had taken his outstretched hand. He did not clasp it palm to palm, but held it across the top, thumb pressed to wrist. Meredith felt a curious tingling coolness dart from wrist to shoulder. The black eyes were looking deep into his, and he felt the same tingling coolness in his brain. His hand was released, the gaze withdrawn. He felt as though something had been withdrawn from his mind with it.

"And your friends—" Yu Ch'ien grasped von Brenner's hand in the same way, black eyes searching the German's. He turned to Lascalles. The Frenchman thrust his hands behind him,

avoided the eyes. He bowed and said: "For me, it is too great honor, venerable father of wisdom."

For an instant Yu Ch'ien's gaze rested on him thoughtfully. He spoke to Meredith: "Of your brother and your brother's wife there is nothing more to be said. They have passed. You shall see the child."

Meredith answered bluntly: "I came to take her with me, Yu Ch'ien."

The priest said as though he had not heard: "Come into the temple and you shall see her."

He walked through the time-bitten pillars into the room where Jean Meredith had died. They followed him. It was oddly dark within the temple chamber. Meredith supposed that it was the transition from the sunny brightness. It was as though the chamber was filled with silent, watchful brown shadows. There was an altar of green stone on which were five ancient lamps of milky jade. They were circular, and in four of them candles burned, turning them into four small moons. The priest led them toward this altar. Not far from the altar was an immense vessel of bronze, like a baptismal font. Between altar and vessel was an old Chinese cradle, and nestled in its cushions was a baby. It was a girl child, fast asleep, one little dimpled fist doubled up to its mouth. The priest walked to the opposite side of the cradle.

He said softly: "Your brother's daughter, Charles Meredith. Bend over. I desire to show you something—let your friends look too."

The three bent over the cradle. The priest gently opened the child's swathings. Upon its breast, over its heart, was a small scarlet birth-mark shaped like a candle flame wavering in the wind. Lascelles lifted his hand, finger pointing, but before he could speak, the priest had caught his wrist. He looked into the Frenchman's eyes. He said sternly: "Do not waken her."

The Frenchman stared at him for a moment, then said through stiff lips: "You devil!"

The priest dropped his wrist. He said to Meredith, tranquilly: "I show you the birth-mark so you may know the child when you see her again. It will be long, Charles Meredith, before you do see her again."

A quick rage swept Meredith but before he succumbed to it he found time to wonder at its fury. He whispered: "Cover him, von Brenner! Throttle him, Lascelles!"

He bent down to lift the baby from the cradle. He stiffened, hands clutching at empty air. The baby and cradle were gone. He looked up. The priest was gone.

Where Yu Ch'ien had stood was a row of archers, a dozen of them. The light from the four lanterns shone shadedly upon them. They were in archaic mail, black lacquered helmets on their heads; under their visors yellow slanted eyes gleamed from impassive faces. Their bows were stretched, strings ready to loose, the triangular arrow heads at point like snakes poised to spring. He looked at them stupidly. Where had they come from? At the head of the line was a giant all of seven feet tall, old, with a face as though made of gnarled pear-wood. It was his arrow that pointed to Meredith's heart. The others—

He sprang back—back between von Brenner and Lascelles. They stood, glaring unbelievably as he had at that line of bowmen. He saw the German lift his pistol, heard him say thickly: "The bowmen of Mons—" heard Lascelles cry: "Drop it, you fool!" Heard the twang of a bow, the hiss of an arrow and saw an arrow pierce the German's wrist and saw the pistol fall to the temple floor.

Lascelles cried: "Don't move, Meredith!" The Frenchman's automatic rang upon the temple floor.

He heard a command—in the voice of Yu Ch'ien. The archers moved forward, not touching the three, but menacing them with their arrows. The three moved back.

Abruptly, beneath the altar, in the light of the four lanterns, he saw the cradle and the child within it, still asleep.

And beside the cradle, Yu Ch'ien.

The priest beckoned him. The line of archers opened as he walked forward. Yu Ch'ien looked at him with unfathomable eyes. He said in the same tranquil tones, utterly without anger or reproach:

"I know the truth. You think I could not prove that truth? You are right. I could not—in any earthly court. And you fear no other. But listen well—you have good reason to fear *me*! Some day your brother's child will be sent to you. Until she comes, look after her interests well and try in no manner directly or indirectly to injure her. You will have the money your brother left you. You will have your interest in her estate. You will have at least seven years before she comes. Use those years well, Charles Meredith—it is not impossible that you may build up much merit which will mitigate, even if it cannot cancel, your debt of wickedness. But this I tell you—do not try to regain this child before she is sent to you, nor attempt to molest her. After she comes to you—the matter is in other hands than mine. Do you understand me, Charles Meredith?"

He heard himself say: "I understand you. It shall be as you say."

Yu Ch'ien thrust his hand into his robe, drew out a package. He said: "Here are written the circumstances of your brother's death, his wife's death and the birth of the child. They are attested by me, and by witnesses of mine. I am well known far beyond the limits of this, my temple. My signature will be sufficient to prove the authenticity of the statements. I have given my reasons why I think it useless to attempt to bring the actual murderers of your brother and his party to justice. I have said that their leader was caught and executed. He was! My real reason for acting as I am may not be known by you. Now pick up those useless weapons of yours—useless at least here—take these papers and go!"

Meredith took the documents. He picked up the guns. He turned and walked stiffly through the bowmen to where von Brenner and Lascelles stood close to the temple doors, under the arrows of the bowmen. They mounted the hill and set their feet upon the ancient road.

Silent, like men half-awake, they passed through

the lines of the watchful pines and at last into the glen where their horses stood tethered—

There was an oath from the German. He was moving the wrist gingerly. And suddenly all three were like men who had just awakened. Von Brenner cried: "The arrow! I felt it—I saw it! But there iss no arrow and no mark. And my hand iss good as ever."

Lascelles said very quietly: "There was no arrow, von Brenner. There were no bowmen. Nevertheless, let us move from here quickly."

Meredith said: "But I saw the arrow strike. I saw the archers!"

"When Yu Ch'ien gripped our wrists he gripped our minds," answered Lascelles. "If we had not believed in the reality of the bowmen—we would not have seen them. The arrow could not have hurt you, von Brenner. But the priest had trapped us. We had to believe in their reality." He untied his horse. He turned to Meredith, foot on stirrup: "Did Yu Ch'ien threaten you?"

Meredith, answered with a touch of grim humor: "Yes—but he gave me seven years for the threats to take effect."

Lascelles said: "Good. Then you and I, von Brenner, get back to Peking. We'll spend the night at that village of the too well informed headman—go back by the open road. But ride fast."

He gave the horse his knee and raced away. The other two followed. The horse with the wide Chinese saddle placidly watched them go.

Two hours after dusk they came to the village. The headman was courteous, provided them with food and shelter, but no longer was communicative. Meredith was quiet. Before they rolled into their blankets he said to Lascelles: "When the priest grasped your hand you were about to say something—something about that birth-mark on the child's breast. What was it?"

Lascelles said: "I was about to say that it was the symbol of the fox women."

Meredith said: "Don't tell me you believe in that damned nonsense!"

Lascelles answered: "I'm not telling you anything, except that the mark was the symbol of the fox women."

Von Brenner said: "I've seen some strange things in this damned China and elsewhere, Pierre. But neffer an arrow that pierced a man's wrist and hung there quivering—and then was gone. But the wrist dead—as mine wass."

Lascelles said: "Listen, Franz. This priest is a great man. What he did to us I have seen sorcerers, so-called, do to others in Tibet and in India. But never with such completeness, such clarity. The archers came from the mind of the priest into our minds—yes, that I know. But I tell

you, Franz, that if you had believed that arrow had pierced your heart—your heart would not be alive as your wrist is! I tell you again—he is a great man, that priest."

Meredith said: "But—"

Lascelles said: "For Christ's sake, man, is it impossible for you to learn!" He rolled himself in his blankets. Went to sleep.

Meredith lay awake, thinking, for long. He thought: *Yu Ch'ien doesn't know a damned thing. If he did—why would he promise me the child? He knows he can't prove a thing.* He thought: *He thinks he can frighten me so that when the child comes of age she'll get what's coming to her.* And he thought: *Lascelles is as crazy as Li-kong. Those archers were hidden there all the time. They were real, all right. Or, if it was a matter of hypnotism, I'd like to see myself believe in them in New York!* He laughed.

It was a damned good arrangement, he concluded. Probably the priest wouldn't send the brat back to him for ten years. But in the meantime—*well, he'd like to see that file of archers in one of the Bronx night clubs!* It was a good arrangement—for him. The priest was as senile as Martin . . .

He was well satisfied. He went to sleep.

In due time, without accident, the three of them arrived at Peking. News of what had happened to his brother had preceded him, he was somewhat puzzled to discover. It made his explanations all the easier.

He was somewhat of a hero when he sailed for home. He had risked his life to discover what had become of his brother. He dwelt upon the excellencies of Yu Ch'ien, his brother's old friend, an "educated Chinese", speaking English perfectly. It had not been possible to bring so young a child away. Yu Ch'ien would send it to him and his wife when it was old enough to stand the rigors of the journey. He had perfect confidence in Yu Ch'ien. In the meantime, he must get back to America and look after the interest of his brother's child . . . He was, indeed, quite a hero.

He sailed back to America. His arrival there coincided with an especially noisome Senate scandal which compelled public attention far more than the possible misadventures of a millionaire's child. By the time the scandal had dissipated, Yu Ch'ien's ward was no longer to be regarded as news. And for eighteen years newspapers nor anything else paid the slightest heed to Martin Meredith's heiress.

Charles Meredith himself had almost forgotten her.

And then a cable informed him that the child was on her way.



PART II
THE BLUE
PAGODA

BY HANNES BOK

V

NOW though von Brenner was a bachelor, Lascelles was not. Seven years previous to his introduction to Charles Meredith, he had invested in a shady venture which had failed—and in failing had carried his underworld associates down with it—leaving him penniless in San Francisco with none to whom he could appeal for help.

His plight was indeed so desperate that he might have lowered himself to a bit of honest work if he had not met Cathleen Bennett. She was the attractive little cripple seated in the restaurant where he discovered, very artistically, that his wallet had been stolen. She paid for his meal. He would hardly have carried on their acquaintance if he had not learned that she had just received a small inheritance. He married her.

She bore him a son whom he named Paul, but when the second child was on its way, her money came to its end, and Lascelles vanished into parts unknown. Since Cathleen really loved the man, she passed along to young Paul her admiration for the tall and aristocratic adventurer who had come into her life and who—she was so sure of it!—would come again. Since she was ill-equipped to support herself and her two children, malnourishment rather than the resultant tuberculosis, killed her and her daughter. Young Paul was left to fend for himself.

His first step in the career of fly-by-night was a bit of strike-breaking which he performed without regard for the right and wrong of it. To him it was adventure, excitement—the gambler's passion for suspense. Then a bit of political thuggery which necessitated an impromptu tour of foreign regions: Africa, the Middle East, Ecuador . . . until finally he met his father in Brazil.

Intent on escaping to British Guiana, he blundered into a little village. There had been no smoke to warn him, nor barking of curs. Only the smell of death as he broke into the clearing and saw the charred huts . . . the swollen, fly-blown corpses of the mutilated men and butchered women . . . the little children, hardly more than babies, ruthlessly tortured and left wandering alone in the dead village to scream their hunger and anguish. They were too weak for screaming now. With a shot he put an end to the misery of a rasp-breathed child who lay twisted with a broken spine, aimlessly dragging itself around and around . . . away from its pain.

It was not an unusual story. The director of a wildcat rubber firm had ordered a massacre of the Indians when they had revolted from the treatment accorded them. Paul found an old crone lying among the ashes of one of the ruined hovels, mouthing horribly through stumps of blackened teeth. Senhor Pandejo had done this, she said . . . Senhor Pandejo who had called himself the Indian's white friend and had promised much hap-

piness and riches. The elders had warned the eager youths, who had not listened. Promises fill the heart more heavily than advice!

And so the younger villagers gave themselves into the hands of the Senhor Pandejo, placing themselves into slavery which, when they sought to turn from it, brought death . . .

He set his jaw firmly, when for the last time the old woman had coughed froth of blood. He turned southward in search of this Senhor Pandejo. He stormed into the man's camp bellowing recriminations which launched a hand-to-hand encounter with Pandejo's foremen, culminating with a bullet in Paul's shoulder. Then the discovery . . . Pandejo's name was Lascelles. Pandejo was his father.

Old Pierre admired the youngster's pluck. He suavely put aside any responsibility toward the Indians by disclaiming knowledge of what his underlings—sufficiently goaded, of course—might have done. And Paul, as susceptible as his mother to Pierre's intense magnetism, fell under the man's spell.

They shared no physical similarity. Pierre, his long body string-muscled and hard-bitten, was a throwback to Old France and the courts of long-dead, degenerate kings. In silk breeches, lace ruffles, powder and patches, he would have been typed for the part. His face, though stamped with cruelty and frank avarice, was still as finely chiseled as a Richelieu's or a Voltaire's. But only the ghost of this vanished elegance clung to him—like those ghosts which linger in ruined dwellings. His color was pallid, washed out as though the original hues had faded in passage from generation to generation.

Not so young Paul. He was, despite his father's racial contribution, a Celt through and through. Like blotting paper, his mother's Irish blood had absorbed the flaws of the Lascelles constitution; more than cancelled them.

Paul was not so tall as his tall father, was stocky, all breadth of shoulder and bulging strength. A striking sketch of a face, modelled as though by some impatient modern sculptor, *bonhomme* blent with daring. Eyes the grey of Aran's rain-washed cliffs, hair the crisp blue-black of Erin's winter nights.

The pair lingered in partnership until circumstances drove Pierre elsewhere and Paul to Russia, where he effected some petty skulduggery against anti-communistic nations. A bit of active propaganda, he called it.

In subsequent wanderings, each invariably the recompense of its predecessor, he frequently ran across his father's trail, a swath cut through the little people of many countries like the path a scythe leaves in the grass. Brutality, rapine and blood . . . a half-caste infant bearing the Lascelles name and already dying from the *yang-mei* sores, the *pei-cho* blindness . . .

Slowly he came to see Pierre for the man's true worth, and remembered the forsaken mother and sister who had died . . . he began to hate Pierre . . . and hate . . .

Therefore it was with distinct shock that he opened the door of his small room on Tenth Avenue to old Pierre, the room wherein he was con-

valescings from his latest exploit and wherein he was awaiting and planning something new. He had desired this meeting, yes, but never hoped for it. In savage, red-framed dreams he had found his father and claimed vengeance . . .

But this was different! He had not expected to be taken by surprise. While he was recovering from the shock, old Pierre thrust out a hand in greeting. At least Paul did not take it, shake it. The blood roared in his ears like dynamos in a power house. Pierre smiled thinly, brushed past him and seated himself on the lone rickety chair. And still Paul could not move.

"So we meet again!" Pierre observed. "It was difficult finding you. By chance I learned that you are here." He looked Paul up and down appraisingly, smiling with genuine pleasure—too, with undisguised admiration. "You remain quite a lad, my boy—quite a lad! I am proud of you. The Lascelles blood runs true, yes!"

Then somberly: "I need you, Paul. For the first time in my life, I have lifted more than my fingers can hold. I want you to—ah, help me in the lifting, if you will—"

And now Paul noted the change in his father, the deepened seams from nostrils to mouth-corners, the forehead lines like eroded gullies, the flesh sagging like wet paper under the crafty eyes. Lascelles' hair was almost gone. All these were marks of a psychic hunger that no amount of self-indulgence could ever vitiate—and Paul was glad.

The roaring did not die nor diminish in his ears. Still he could do nothing but stare, all his disgust, resentment and hatred speaking plainly in his expression. If Lascelles noted it, he disregarded it, for he went on:

"I need you—son! I am in the mire up to my very neck, and none can save me now, unless it is you."

Paul could not speak, else he might have cried: *Up to your neck, are you? Need my help, do you? Now you know what my mother and sister went through, damn you! You failed them, you failed me—all your life you've made it your specialty to fail whoever trusted you, dragging them through pain and dishonor! And now you need me? To hell with you! I'm glad, damn you, glad! May you burn in hell without ever tasting the cooling waters of forgiveness . . .*

He could not say those words, only stand thinking them and wondering if, after all, he could make them heard above the grinding drone all around him.

Then, as though a demon had crept beside him, was whispering in his ear, audible above the tumult, came the thought: *Pay him back! For yourself—for all those others! Agree with him—but only with your lips! Say that you will help him—do help him a little—taking care to push him deeper and deeper into whatever quicksand he's in. Then abandon him as he abandoned all the others . . .*

He was mature, certainly. But still hot-tempered enough to cast the die then and there. At once demon-voice and screaming hum faded away, leaving him tottering in the new-born silence.

He had never considered himself an actor. He was surprised at the ease with which he produced

a smile, with which he stepped forward, holding out his hand.

"Senhor Pandejo!" He used the man's Brazilian name—he could not bring himself to call him *father*. "Here, in New York!"

Their hands met, clenched in hearty grasp: Paul's warm and dry, Lascelles' chill and wet. Unthinkingly, Paul started to wipe his palm on his thigh; he caught himself, checked the gesture as it began. He said: "It's been a long time. You'll have to excuse my apparent inhospitality. You're the last person I expected to see."

"I know." A trace of sardonic amusement lurked in Lascelles' eyes, guile under the half-lowered lids. He stiffened quickly, banished craft and cunning . . . *never do to make the youngster suspicious . . .*

He occupied a full minute in a deliberate scrutiny of the forlorn, dark room. Then he asked: "Not doing so well of late, are you?" Paul flushed. Lascelles went on: "Help me, son, and you'll be in money." Again he scanned his surroundings. "You need it!"

Paul would not sit. He folded his arms, leaned against the closed door. "What do you want me to do?"

"Hardly what I would call work." Anxiety was written all over old Pierre; in his narrowed eyes, in his hands which kept folding and unfolding, in his feet which seemed uncomfortable no matter where or how he placed them; in even his body, which slumped in a huddle.

He was silent for a moment, marshalling his thoughts. Then, "Have you ever heard of—fox-women?" he asked.

Paul had; in his odyssey over the face of the globe it would have been impossible not to have heard of them. They flavored the myths of nearly every land he had entered. Yet he shrugged, as though the term were strange. *Let the Old Man do all of the work!*

Lascelles tacked in another direction. "Have you ever heard of Jean Meredith, Martin Meredith's heiress?"

Paul had not; he countered: "Is there a connection between them?"

"A long story," Lascelles replied. "But you should hear it, for it is the reason I am here." He indicated the sagging bed. "Sit down; make yourself comfortable."

The hot blood swept Paul's cheeks, crimsoning them. Sitting, he thought: *Damn him! Making himself host in my own room!* Nevertheless, he smiled; nodded for Pierre to begin.

Lascelles told him the story; how, a little over seventeen years ago, he and the German, von Brenner, had been directed to Charles Meredith in Peking. They had been engaged by Charles to accompany him on an expedition into Yunnan, where Charles' brother and sister-in-law had unaccountably disappeared. Their quest had led them steadily nearer the Temple of the Foxes, of which Lascelles had already heard much and in whose dangers, after what he had seen of the occult in Tibet and India, he half-believed.

He was not surprised when they learned that Martin Meredith's party had been wiped out; by that time he had guessed that Charles had plotted

the slaughter to inherit Martin's fortune. At the last village before the temple, they learned that Martin's wife had given birth to a girl-child, which was in the care of the temple's priest Yu Ch'ien. And of this, too, Lascelles was certain that Charles had known all along.

They climbed a steep stairway to the temple. Old Lascelles' description of the steps, with their crouching ranks of plants and martially straight trees, made Paul's flesh creep. Yu Ch'ien welcomed them, calling Charles by name—although none had passed the three on their way to the temple, and the hills had hid them until the very last moment before their arrival. There was no telephone connected to the village; none of the natives could be expected to use a wireless—yet somehow Yu Ch'ien had known.

They saw the child in her cradle before an antique jade altar whereon burned five globular lamps like drowsing moons. Charles tried to lift her; cradle, child and priest vanished. The temple chamber filled with archers—archers apparently leaping the gap from remote centuries into the present, wearing the lacquered, scaly mail of long ago. Von Brenner tried to shoot; an arrow pierced his wrist; he dropped his gun. Yu Ch'ien threatened Charles, then sent the three men away without the child. She would be sent Charles, Yu Ch'ien promised, in due time.

The bowmen had been illusions. Yu Ch'ien had, on devious pretexts, managed to touch each of the three adventurers; had sent something of his personality into them through the touch . . . a matter of electrical contact, perhaps, science stating that the mind functions on electrical principles. Yu Ch'ien had looked into their consciousnesses, taken what knowledge from them he could use and left behind, substituted, something all his own. Which was—the vision of the bowmen.

"For they were phantoms, never fear," Lascelles said, and licked dry lips. "Yes—mere phantoms! If they had not appeared so unexpectedly, shocking us into accepting them as realities—things might have gone differently. Von Brenner's mind reacted to his apparent physical perception, and he felt pain in his wrist. We heard his cry, were persuaded by it that he had been hurt; his belief was transmitted to us. Once we were outside, there was no mark on his wrist. But then—it was too late."

He said: "We might have gone back, better prepared—for there are means to disarm the foxes. I heard of them through a street-juggler of the White Lily sect who had once been useful to me. But Charles would not go back, nor von Brenner. Nor myself! I was not eager to face Yu Ch'ien again, protected though I might be with counter-magic. Besides, it was Charles' affair, not mine. So we three parted in Peking. And the years lumbered along."

Lascelles continued: "There is a certain office in Peking which forwards mail to me. At the close of this January, while in Florida, I received a forwarded cable from Charles, asking me to come at once to him. He said he was writing von Brenner; that if I knew the German's whereabouts, to bring him with me. I have never refused an offer of money—if sufficiently attractive

—so I communicated with Charles at once, hardly thinking that the niece was in the picture."

He shifted uneasily. "When I reached New York, visited Charles, von Brenner had already arrived; the summons reached him at his Berlin club. Charles told us that Martin Meredith's daughter had just arrived from China; that he was not afraid of her nor of the powers perhaps invested in her by Yu Ch'ien, but that he preferred being on the safe side. It seemed he defied Yu Ch'ien's orders to protect and further the girl's financial interests. Martin Meredith left her millions, yet today—she has not a sou!"

Paul asked: "How is that?"

Lascelles replied, both resentful and smirking: "Simple—when you have Charles' capital of five hundred thousand for a beginning. He was the girl's trustee; in such capacity, he formed a company in her name—the Amalgamated Pearl Culture Corporation. Through an agent, using an alias, he procured an island in the British Bahamas for five hundred dollars the acre. A part of this island the agent then sold to the Pearl Corporation for half a million dollars. You perhaps know that some of Charles' income is derived from his line of freighters? Well, he derived considerably more by charging exorbitant rates to deliver equipment to the island—equipment, incidentally, not only obsolete but his own—sold at astonishing prices to the Corporation, again through an agent.

"By now he had several millions to spend. He created a rival company and began squeezing out the Pearl Corporation, working both firms simultaneously. Like playing both sides in a chess game . . . and cheating with one.

"The result? The Pearl Corporation went bankrupt; the girl's millions are lost, and there is nothing she can do about it. All her money has come legally into Charles' hands."

His expression lost its malice, became somber. "Charles engaged von Brenner and me as—technical advisers, as good a definition as any—for a vague business venture which he did not clarify at the time, because he had swiftly shifted the topic, returning to his niece. I knew and von Brenner knew at once that this business venture was nothing more nor less than acting as bodyguards to Charles. If Yu Ch'ien were resentful of the legal mishandling of the girl's money, he might seek to punish Charles, perhaps through the girl. The German and I were to see that this did not come about.

"Von Brenner was perturbed—Charles laughed at him. This is New York, Charles said, not China. Yu Ch'ien and his illusions belong in the East, where the people's attitude toward the supernatural is conducive to mass hallucination. But here? An illusion disrupting traffic at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street? Hardly! Besides, Yu Ch'ien had not come—only the girl and her brown tire-woman. So there was nothing to fear!

"Nevertheless, I asked: 'If there is nothing to fear, why engage us?' Charles replied that it was mostly a case of Auld Lang Syne. His rationalisation reassured us. Easy money, von Brenner and I thought. So, two fools, we accepted his offer."

He laughed feebly at his own gullibility. "Then

Charles told us—very casually, of course—that he had sent a man to Peking to contact a certain Li-kong there. Von Brenner and I had met Charles through this Li-kong. He is what you would call in this country an underworld character—a gangster. He will do anything at all for money. And he knows much of the fox-lore. He would give us information, Charles said, to keep us safe—if we were worried. We assured him that we were not worried. But I had misgivings. Why had Charles mentioned Li-kong at all?

He said: "We were given rooms in Charles' home, as if we were members of his family. We dined with him and his wife, Margot—and the niece. Her name, as was her mother's, is Jean. Yet she prefers to be called—Yin Hu. Perhaps you know the Chinese?"

Paul shook his head.

Lascelles said: "Translated with exceptional freedom, that name means 'woman fox'—but there are other ramifications. I thought that possibly it was old Yu Ch'ien's humor, accustoming the girl to such a name—calculated to keep alive in Charles a sense of his guilt of murder, punishing him through his conscience. A beautiful girl, this Yin Hu—how incredibly beautiful I cannot tell you! But you know my reputation in regard to beautiful women—"

He stopped in mid-sentence, coughed, nervously glancing toward his son.

He said hastily: "She is very lovely. The brown woman, Fien-wi, was present. She did not dine with us. Neither did she act as servant. She sat on a cushion on the floor, a little behind her mistress' chair, not watching us but mumbling to herself as over she told the beads of a necklace of *ti-man-jeng* jade, the milky stone in which, superstition says vulgarly, spirits have made love. She was the same as when first I saw her, eighteen years ago, in the Temple of the Foxes. If age has touched her, it was with loving hands."

Paul said: "I still don't see why you need me!"

Lascelles answered testily: "I come to that!" His tone lost sharpness, became meditative. He went on: "In all, there were six of us at the table. Yin Hu at one end, then von Brenner and Charles. Margot at the other end, opposite Yin Hu. Then Erwin Wilde, Charles' psychiatrist. Doctor-in-residence, one might call him; he lives with the Merediths. For some reason Charles needs him. Then, lastly, myself."

He murmured: "Von Brenner could not keep his eyes from Yin Hu, and the German is no longer young. Passion should have thinned by now from his blood. But I am not young myself—and neither could I keep my eyes from the girl! She is a singularly pretty child. Brown hair shot with copper, something in it of a queer russet-red; eyes grey and clear. She was dressed Chinese style in a long form-fitting gown, sleeveless but with a high collar. It was sky-blue, silver embroidery on the breast. The brown woman Fien-wi wore a similar garment. It amused me—as though they were in uniform, like soldiers."

"Yin Hu spoke of her nostalgia for Yu Ch'ien and the temple wherein she had been raised. At once Charles suggested that she return there, that here is nothing to compare with Yunnan's serenity

and peace. He was too precipitate, too obviously anxious that Yin Hu be gone. I saw Margot glower a warning at him, then quickly, as though to allay any suspicion, turn to Yin Hu with beaming face. I also turned to the girl—but now a woman was sitting in her place. A stranger!"

Slowly he rolled his head from side to side, watching his finger clasp and uncurl. "Different she was—utterly, amazingly different! For now her hair was entirely chestnut-red, the color of oak-leaves in Autumn; her eyes not only slanted, they were the green of dark aquamarine! Her gown was the same in cut, but its tints had deepened, grown warm—almost the russet of her hair. On her breast the silver threads shone brightly as moonlit ice! And beneath the gown her body had altered, become rounded—voluptuous."

"As I said before, von Brenner's eyes could not leave her; the German licked his lips. Wilde, the psychiatrist, was staring too—but with detached regard. She was not physically attractive to him as she was to von Brenner. No, he saw in her something of only clinical interest."

"Yin Hu spoke. Her soft, low voice had lifted several tones and become metallic. As though we heard in words the thin, sweet chiming of a tiny silver bell."

"She said: 'My father's brother—that was but my weaker self speaking. Much do I love dear Yu Ch'ien, and much do I love my temple and its blue pool of dreams! Yet equally as much I must love my father's own land. I have been extraordinarily schooled in the Chinese classics—should I not therefore temper such teachings with the lore of the West? I have lived long in solitude; I have seen none but a primitive people. Now I will study civilization—your own Occidental civilization whose symbol is—the Machine.'

"She said: 'You of the *pai-chung*, you of the white race, accept as reality only that which you can see, hear, touch, smell and measure. But reality is the greatest illusion of all! It interests me, this preoccupation of yours with illusion. I would point to you the error in your ways! I would set up the arts of the Temple of the Foxes against your arts of the West!'

"The admiration drained from von Brenner's eyes. He said irritably: 'The arts of—the Temple of the Foxes!' His hand shook, spilling wine. I set my own glass down quickly, for his fear was communicated to me; I felt a prickling of the scalp. I knew my fingers might tremble."

"I looked at Charles. Except for his working mouth, his face was inscrutable. Margot Meredith laughed. She asked: 'And if reality is only another illusion, what then is real, truly real? The Soul? But in these days only churchmen speak of—souls!'

"Wilde observed obliquely: 'To the psychologist, the Soul is only the ego, the awareness of self.'

"The lids drooped low over Yin Hu's sea-green eyes. She said demurely, sweetly, each word steaming with sarcasm: 'Yet there is in the universe more than your Science had found reason for—to my imperfect knowledge, garnered from slight reading. Have not Eddington and Einstein said it? Do not the other great men confess that phenomena can be dissected, formulated, only to a

certain point before they are reduced to intangibilities? Ah, but yes—over every research of Science there comes a time when a gate is closed, through which no mind may pass. And what is this gate? The unknown! The intangible!”

“She laughed, a bubbling sound like the ripple of chilly grey water. She said: ‘In a last analysis, Science has named the atom an etheric vortex, a whirlpool of—nothingness! Then our reality, built on these atoms, is—nothing! And what has Science made of sunspots, cosmic rays? Should it then presume to claim that it knows all the facts concerning the human mind—the human soul?’”

“Wilde’s face was dark. He said: ‘Psychology makes no such claim!’”

“She smiled at him, sweetly—oh, very sweetly! She said: ‘Yet you deny the soul!’”

“He did not answer. One by one her gaze swept us, her mouth smiling, but in her eyes, contempt. She said: ‘What little I have seen of the *pai-chung* civilization—it frightens me! All its growth is without, none within. You with your atomic bombs have reduced warfare to a mere pulling of a lever, and the lands of your enemies vanish like smoke in the wind! You seek to chart man’s mind by machine . . . and what will be the outcome? The machine will sort out the minds and those in political power will decide which lives are fit to continue or perish. All men must think as one—mass products, machines! There, *there* stirs your curse! You would be—not gods, not even men, nothing but what you yourself have created—machines! It is evident in all phases of your lives, speaking even from your music and works of art. Technique, not the products of technique, is all you admire!’”

“She sighed, but not from sadness. Her eyes were bright, very bright. Von Brenner was staring again, not hearing her words. His tongue slid over his flabby lips as though he were a hungry child yearning for forbidden sweetmeats; his fingers closed, tightened, as though he clutched and held fast.

“She asked: ‘And how must it end? I will tell you! Scattered throughout the globe are the few who shun this mechanical illusion, who seek the light of what is greater than themselves, who follow other, simpler paths in the quest to open the Gates which bar their way. And in some instances, they have forced the Gates ajar, have peeped within and *seen* . . .”

“Wilde interrupted, his mouth twisted in a sneering smile: ‘Why then do we not hear from them? Our ears are open to their teachings—let them speak!’”

“Again Yin Hu laughed, the glissade of harp-strings thrummed by snowy wind. She said: ‘They have spoken—and what was the answer? Laughter, the unthinking laughter of complacent fools! Ah, well’—she shrugged—‘the peacock lent its plumes to the ape—which remained an ape.’”

“And now I noticed that, though we had been eating, she had not tasted her food. She had touched it here and there with her silver, but none of it had passed her lips. Yet the illusion had been that she was eating.

“I glanced to Fien-wi. I perceived that the brown woman was either left-handed or that she

counted her beads backward. For she moved them with her left hand, not her right—as all Chinese do. And to her left, not clockwise, as is the rote!”

VI

LASCELLES went on: “We had finished the meal. Now we adjourned to the living-room where Yin Hu entertained us with music, drawing the long golden nail-guards from her slim fingers as she took up the lute-shaped *pi-pa* and plucked its four strings. Fien-wi disposed of her beads, drew from her girdle a little silver flute and at a nod from Yin Hu, accompanied her.

“I have never much cared for Chinese music. To me it has remained at the stage of medieval Western compositions. Yet I listened with an intensity of interest which surprised myself. The sounds were but single plucked ones, trills of one note or another, an occasional chord. Fien-wi’s flute warbled and lisped. Yin Hu played us such pieces as, ‘The Reflections of Falling Flowers seen in Calm Water’, ‘Mist across the Rising Moon’, and lastly, ‘Fox Swimming the Black Waters of a Bottomless Well’.

“Margot was frankly bored. Slowly her gaze traveled around from man to man, then clung to me. I was uncomfortable, I did not wish Charles to see. Von Brenner was staring, too—but at the girl. Again his tongue flicked his lips, gloating.

“After the playing, Yin Hu arose and turned to set aside her instrument. Von Brenner went to her. Under pretense of reaching for the *pi-pa* to examine it, he pressed unnecessarily close to the girl. His reaching hand brushed against her breast. She shuddered—distinctly I saw it—and recoiled. But her face was expressionless. As for von Brenner, he paused in mid-movement. Like what your Hollywood technicians term ‘trick photography’ when a leaping figure halts in mid-air and remains there against gravitational pull. So it was with von Brenner.

“Then Yin Hu smiled, that was all. Von Brenner moved, was himself again, but a shaken self. His eyes wandered bewilderedly; he stepped back, one hand going to his forehead, passing across his eyes.

“He said falteringly: ‘I am very tired. Beg of you I must, that I be permitted to leave.’ Without awaiting any such polite permission, he turned, strode abruptly from the room. We talked a little after he left, but nothing of importance was said.

“The change crept over Yin Hu, or rather I should have said, crept from her. Gradually, as though she were a painting in fugitive colors, the red faded from her hair, the green from her eyes. And they were no longer slanting. Her dress was azure. Fien-wi replaced the silver flute in her gown, was once more telling her beads.

“Yin Hu was no more the voluptuous, contemptuous woman. No, she was the young girl

again. And confused! Her talk rambled on the verge of incoherency. Soon she begged leave to retire, at which we all parted company. I went to my room, but I could not sleep."

Pierre Lascelles settled into another position. "No, sleep I could not. For there was much to consider. Had there been threat in what Yin Hu had said? I thought so. And the transformation from girl to woman and back again—a trick of the eyes? Had only I been aware of it? I must ask one of the others . . .

"I tossed. I turned. Sleep's curtain would not descend over me. I recalled the music of the fox in the dark water, and I was afraid. I felt the loneliness of that fox, swimming, swimming, ever swimming with only the endless depths beneath me, nor hope of ever gaining ground! I thought of von Brenner and the way in which he had stood motionless, the way in which he had looked around when the spell was lifted from him . . . as if he had been gone from us to some far place years away . . . and my fear would not leave me . . .

"I thought: *Is Yin Hu a fox-woman, then? Has she come here to avenge slain father and mother? Does Charles guess?* I thought: *I am glad indeed that she bears me no ill-will!* Then I sat up, huddling the covers to my chest. For the thought had come to me: *But in accepting responsibility for Charles' welfare, for that was what I had done, Auld Lang Syne or not, have I not made myself part and parcel of the man? Is not his guilt transmitted to me? Am I not as open to punishment as he?*

"No, with such thoughts as bedfellows I could not sleep.

"Without tapping on my door, von Brenner stumbled in. He had not changed into night-dress. He dropped on my bed. 'Lascelles! Are you awake?'

"I sat up. 'If I had been, I would not be now,' I told him. 'What is it?'

"I switched on the bedside table's lamp. The German had been looking toward the door, but now he clapped hands to eyes. Slowly he took his fingers away, looked at me. He tried to smile, but something had happened to his face. Age had hacked and trampled it; a few hours had altered him by many years.

"He asked: 'Do you think it followed me in? The fox?'

"I looked, saw nothing. 'Fox? What fox?' I inquired. The flame of his fear cast sparks on the tinder-pile of my soul.

"As before, he tried to smile. Only it was not a smile. He straightened a little. 'Ach! It has been but my imagination,' he said. 'All *fantastische*, all making-believe.' He said that a fox had been following him. Wherever he turned, it was there. On the floor, a few feet before him; at the door when he turned to it; on his bed, sprawled out, tongue lolling, great green and somehow human eyes lazily blinking.

"*'Die Fuchs-dame!'* he said, 'Through all the dinner, I have been thinking of the foxes. It has given me the indigestion and the nightmare. I will go.' But he did not go, not for a long while, and when he did, he borrowed my gun. Seemed that

the one he had on him was not enough. I gave it to him, strangely loath to part with it.

"And still I stayed awake. The sky lightened with the false dawn. I thought I heard a faint pattering outside my window—the sound squirrels make when scampering over a roof. Then dawn indeed. I slept, awaking late.

"Luncheon was my breakfast. The others had made as bad a night of it as I. Wilde was surly; Charles came in unshaven; Margot appeared *en négligée*. Von Brenner was still as haggard, still as swiftly aged. I saw Wilde was watching him. The German hardly ate. As he put food to his mouth, he would stop, the fork at his lips. His eyes would shift sidewise, stare; then his head would jerk around, following the stare. Once I saw his gaze travel slowly across the room as though it tracked the movements of something unseen. He said nothing, nothing. Then suddenly he threw down his fork. The clatter made us jump. He folded his arms across that plateful of bacon and eggs and dropping his head on them, began to cry.

"Margot's chair scraped as she cast down her napkin and arose, nose pinching with disgust. 'Good God!' she said. She threw a look to me, a look of appeal and demand, and marched away, thin skirts wreathing.

"Charles did not move—that is, move voluntarily. But his hands began to shake. Their heels beat a faint tattoo on the tablecloth. I do not know whether I shook or not. Wilde was amused—disdainfully amused. He leaned aside, thumped von Brenner's back.

"'Control yourself, man!' he said. But the German was too far gone. He cried . . . and cried . . . and cried . . . and somehow I wanted to do likewise, and so, I think, did Charles. For that shaking and sobbing, was it not only an echo of Yin Hu's music—the fox swimming in the well of bottomless black water?

"Von Brenner suffered himself to be drawn erect by the psychiatrist. His face revolted me . . . the magic years had scuffed across it in greater numbers, in devilish parade. It bore but the faintest resemblance to von Brenner's face as we knew it. Rather it was von Brenner's face should the German have died and many years later been exhumed.

"I could not endure sight of it—nor could Charles. I turned, closing my eyes. Charles sprang up with a thin, shrill cry and staggered from the room.

"Wilde thumped my shoulder. 'Here don't you go into the same funk,' he reproached. 'Pull yourself together and help me get this man upstairs to his bed.'

"Compose myself I did. After all, what was this to frighten me, *me*—Pierre Lascelles? Had I not looked many times into the faces of Torture and Death? Why should this so upset me? I refused to fear! I arose, stiffened my spine, and assisted Wilde in leading von Brenner up to his room. The German tottered, hung heavily on our arms. We had more than to steady him: almost we carried him.

"We laid him on his bed. Wilde talked to the man, told him that this collapse was simply the

result of the life von Brenner had lived—no routine, too much liquor, drugs and women irregularly sandwiched between periods of forced frugality and self-denial. Enough to tear any man's system apart. The fox which pursued von Brenner was but the struggle of his subconscious; the German desired Yin Hu at a period of his life when such desire was unhealthy, unnatural. Very well, his subconscious warned him against the dangers inherent in such desire by taking shape in a dream of Yin Hu as a preying fox. That was all. If von Brenner insisted otherwise, he was headed for a nervous breakdown; more, paranoia. There was ineffable and somehow filthy humor in Wilde's voice when he said it; and in saying it, he looked too at me.

"Von Brenner lay quietly, but only because Wilde had frightened him more than the fox. The psychiatrist slipped away to get the German a sedative. Von Brenner caught and held my hand. He whispered: 'Pierre, you know *das warheit*—the truth! Can you not make him understand?'"

"I make Wilde understand? The man's knowledge is a set of blinkers on his eyes, preventing him from seeing anything but his one lonely path! I could not. And I was as afraid as von Brenner, who now said: 'She means to kill me, Pierre, for what I would have liked doing. Yah—she means to kill!' And he echoed my own thought: 'Here have I come to help Meredith. On his side have I committed myself. Am I not thereby as guilty, as marked for death, as he? For him she will kill, Lascelles—and me and you. Unless quickly we get away!'"

"It was truth. And now I knew why I was afraid. Torture, death—yes, in many instances they have confronted me. But they were real things, to be contended with by known, practical methods.

"But what faced me, what faces me now—was not, is not, a tangible thing to be fought with tangible means! Who can strangle the wind, grapple with thunder? I am unequipped for this kind of battle as a naked child with empty hands . . ."

Paul asked: "I thought you knew counter-magic?" Lascelles eyed him askance, covertly; Paul thought: *Ah, I see. He's hiding something from me . . .*

Lascelles said, at length: "While von Brenner slept, Margot came to me. Angry, she was—vividly, dynamically angry. My blood quickened. I forgot fear in hunger for her, remembering that she had invited me with her eyes. She turned away her face, struck down my reaching hands.

" 'This is no time for nonsense,' she said, her tone cutting like the whistling lash. 'Franz von Brenner has upset Charles, more than upset him! I thought you and he came here to be of help? He is only a drag on my husband. You must take him away—before he has another seizure.'"

"I tried to explain what had happened. She would not listen. Like the psychiatrist Margot can see the world only as it affects her own code of living and the precepts embodied in that code. What does not fit her pattern she tosses aside and forgets.

"She left me. I temporized, but at last I went

to Yin Hu. With shame, with anger for my credulity, I saw the girl in daylight, only a girl, nothing more. It had all been illusion, a figment of my troubled conscience, that yesternight vision of a fox-woman! Nevertheless, I begged her to lift the curse from von Brenner.

"And she did not understand! I am a good judge of character, so I think; I can read the tracks left by the thoughts which scamper across the face, and I say to you, she was honest in her denial! More, she was frightened and sorry for the German, as if indeed she looked upon him as a valued friend. But in that fright and sorrow I sensed a little which was for her own self. So I knew that she was two people. Sometimes the girl Jean, sometimes the fox Yin Hu. A puzzled girl who knew herself for one given to strange mental lapses, psychic blackouts—but who did not know, nor want to know, the reason behind it. If fox-taint were within her—it was through no fault of hers. And this was good for me to learn, a point whereon to base future stratagems, if ever need for them arose.

"From her position in the background, Fien-wi watched us. She speaks no European language nor known Eastern tongue—known, that is, to myself. Surely she could not comprehend our words. In inverse ratio, she could comprehend the thought behind them. Malice and guile sparkled deep in her black eyes, eyes extraordinarily like those of the priest Yu Ch'ien. I wished I could speak with her and that she would answer honestly my questions, for I sensed that she knew something about the girl which the girl herself did not comprehend. The beads swung in her hands like a pendulum as she told them . . . as though she were a peculiar form of clock . . . ticking off the minutes of our numbered days . . ."

"I returned to von Brenner's room. The German had gone! He had left his belongings, slipping a short letter of resignation from service under Charles' door. Charles and Margot seemed relieved. The psychiatrist was as unhappy as a laboratory worker whose favorite experimental guinea pig had been stolen.

"The Meredith home, as you may know, is just off Fifth Avenue, in the Sixties. Traffic flows noisily by, yet one does not hear it, becoming as accustomed to the sounds as the rustling of leaves from the tree near his window. Suddenly we rediscovered the sound; cutting across our perceptions came a scream! Then other cries louder and sharper, the squeal of brakes hurriedly clamped down. The babble of a gathering crowd, a buzz as of swarming bees.

"We looked from the window to the Avenue. Traffic had halted, was gathering into immobility like hardening wax. A ring of people clustered around something lying on the pavement. We were above eye-level, could see the thing at which they stared. Von Brenner, and he was dead . . ."

"Charles winced, making a faint inarticulate sound. Margot put her arms around him. From upstairs see-sawed the appogiaturic notes of a seven stringed Ching, notes which contained both laughter and a growl . . ."

"I hurried down to the street. One of the crowd, a doctor, had examined von Brenner. The Ger-

man was struck down by a car whose driver was even then expostulating with the policemen who had appeared. It was not his fault, he claimed. The German had stopped deliberately in the car's path.

"By way of corroboration, someone cried: 'Yes, when the man was in the middle of the street, he stopped of a sudden and looked behind him.'

"Another added: 'I heard him cry *der fuchs, der fuchs!*'

"Drunk, wrote the policemen in their little books. I knew it was murder. But whom could I tell? Who would believe? None!

"I tried to explain it to Charles, Margot and Wilde. They would have none of it. Charles swallows the psychiatrist's theories as a man drinks to forget his troubles. Margot was frankly disinterested. More, scornful. 'I thought you were a man, Pierre,' she told me—as though never she had invited me with her eyes. Her scorn was a blind to screen away my unwanted explication, my warning.

"Thus it was left me to fight and kill the fox in the girl. I considered every possibility. I might for instance hire certain men to enter the Meredith house, slaying the girl under pretense of being discovered during a burglary. Useless! If she were at all alert, she could rout them with her magic before they could touch her. If she were alert . . . for I had begun to see that Fien-wi is necessary to the fox, the catalyst which changes girl into fox-woman . . . how, I did not and still do not know.

"Very well, remove Fien-wi from her mistress' proximity. But how? There is no way to communicate with her; and her quick wit, her all-discerning mind would prevent outright kidnapping . . .

"I remembered the werewolf lore, the silver bullet which slays the man-wolf. But silver is the color of the foxes, their metallic symbol. No, the demons of the East are not those of the West, nor can be treated as such. The supernatural is—the supernatural. But we know little of its laws.

"I thought too of Yin Hu. Two personalities prisoned in one body. The grey-eyed American girl born in the Yunnan temple, tenderly cared for, schooled in the Chinese thought. There is no evil in her! She is as frightened of the foxes as any! But she is weaker than the thing which shares her body, which can at times transform that body in another . . . if there were but some way to appeal to that girl without calling forth the fox . . . if she could but learn the truth of the matter, be persuaded to fight the fox . . .

"Well, I deduced a way . . . but it is one to which I would not resort until all other failed . . ."

Paul thought, with a start: *He means—me!*

VII

LASCELLES said: "I could have run away like von Brenner, who after all did not get very far, nor escape. But I am a Lascelles. Therefore no coward. What if I am next on the fox-woman's list? For I am to be next. Yes—one by one we are to die, leaving Charles for the very last. And as we go, one by one—his anguish of apprehension will increase until he dies the thousand deaths as surely as if physically suffering the *ling-chi*, the death of a thousand slices. Such is the fox-woman's plan!

"Nor will Yin Hu allow me to run away. Each time I set foot on the street, I feel a backward pull . . . to the house . . . a cinnabar-red veil drops over my eyes, flashing with tiny moons that vanish almost on appearance—mockery translated to light! I hear music, the grace-notes of the seven-stringed Ching, laughing and growling, the dainty sounds of a dainty beast. Veil and music partially obliterate what lies before me, muffle the city's sights and sounds. I go as one half-deaf and half-blind . . . and I dread that befalling me which befell von Brenner.

"And as for Li-kong and his ability to help—Li-kong is dead! Charles' messenger returned from Peking with that news. Li-kong died eighteen years ago—a little after he had introduced me to Meredith. So there can be no help from him. No weapon against Yin Hu."

Deeply he looked into the eyes of his son and thought: *How like they are to the grey eyes of the niece!*

He went on: "I harked back to the juggler I knew so long ago in China, and of what he had said concerning foxes. That they are nature spirits, unembodied intelligences, minds without dwellings of flesh. Therefore with no perception of, nor regard for, human values. Essentially wild. Visible and palpable under specialized conditions—but our eyes can behold them only in the arbitrary forms of women or foxes.

"Being essentially wild, their powers stemming from Nature undefiled—they quite reasonably fear civilisation and the domesticity it entails, lest it suck from them their powers, leave them helpless in the mercy of those who would enslave or kill them. For whenever Man dominates something, it serves him—or it dies. The foxes shun tamed beasts—especially dogs and horses. Long and long ago, Man caught and made tractable the horse—then used it as a decoy to secure others. He broke their spirits, took from them their fire—meaning awareness of self and unity with the wild, free world. He did the same with dogs—sent forth his duped wolf to bring back its wild mate, which he transformed into his slave. Well, the foxes are supreme egoists. They will not surrender their alien delights!

"Yet horses and dogs can best them. Why? Because horse and dog draw from them their power—a spiritual kind of capillary action.

"So foxes—as foxes alone—can be brought into subjection through horses and dogs. *But Yin Hu is not a fox alone!* She has a body, now.

"As I have said, foxes dwell only where the natural rhythms are strongest, purest. As civilization encroaches on their territory, they are hemmed in, restricted. Men they hate, but not all

men. Throughout the world there are people born accidentally into as close a relationship with the cosmos as their prehistoric ancestors. The unreligious folk picture Christ as such a being, his miracles the result of an instinctive manipulation of natural forces. There are other examples—the 'fey' people of the Scots, the Irish with their 'second-sight', certain Hindu fakirs, the Latin rhapsodes. There are on record many instances of recognised, if unsatisfactorily explained, clairvoyance.

"There are also cults such as Bhuddism which seek to attune themselves to the pulsations and currents of the universe. That is why the foxes have been more or less confined to the East, where with such people they can live in accord; even bestow on them their powers. More! Share their bodies!

"For—so the juggler told me—when a fox has made itself incarnate, gained seizin of a human body, that body can perforce carry it wheresoever it wills, for the fox commands the soul within it. Superficially, the fox-possessed person is like any other. But deep within, no! For there, in all its power, the fox is enthroned; commanding, not to be denied, unless the owner of the body is strong indeed!

"A warning to all men!" Lascelles said, his voice oddly high and sweet. "To steal a man's body and use it against his own kind . . . pervert it, make obscene jest of it . . . think of the asylums and the fox-tormented men in them . . ."

His voice cracked. He pressed his lips firmly together, sat up straight. When he continued, he was calm.

"Having mustered all this knowledge, I sorted it out for use. Horses? Could I make Charles' house a stable? The psychiatrist laughs at my pleas, Margot and Charles are his—how you say—his stooges! Perhaps I would have my way were the psychiatrist to go . . . but he will not leave; Charles clings to him as a frightened child clings to his mother. Even though both perish in the all-consuming fire, the child believes its mother able to save it.

"He refuses to recognize what occurs under his very eyes! Do you not think it strange that all the white servants have left—except Tuke, the butler? They complained of peculiar sounds in the night and luminous shapes which could be nothing but ghosts. Yin Hu's doing, obviously—especially since with Margot's permission she replaced them with a staff of pidgin Chinese!"

He said: "Less than a week ago, I was returning from a—from a place on the West Side where I had been—ah, entertained." Delicately he flirted a long hand, a peculiar worldly gesture which both defined and typified the manner of the—ah, entertainment. "It was late, long past midnight. I was a little tipsy, but my senses were unclouded.

"I whistled for a cab, climbed in, and we cut across Central Park for Charles' house, entering at the gate on Seventy-second Street. It was not snowing; it was too cold for that. The air was like—like black ice. It knifed into the cab, striking through my overcoat; like a torturer's blade it scraped my bones. It tingled in its coldness like,

the thought came to me, the touch of Yin Hu's hand.

"The cab's tires cracked and popped as it lurched and slewed, over and in, the ruts of the frozen slush. The cab had barely turned south, rounding the Green, when there was a whistling report. One of the rear tires had blown out. We pulled to a grinding, wobbling stop. The driver looked at the tire and became profane. I sympathized with him. Changing tires is never particularly pleasant and in such bitter air—well, I would not stand about and wait.

"I paid him off, telling him that I would walk the remainder of the way. My hands were gloved, but still they were cold. I thrust them deep into my pockets, snuggled my head down below my collar and plodded away. There was a sour taste in my mouth—the liquor had not settled well. Presently I might become sick.

"From far and far away, as though from down below the curve of the horizon itself, I heard a vague and muffled roaring. Growing louder with each second, like the clangor of an approaching train. It was the wind racing from the east, from the direction of Charles' house, the direction in which I was headed. It rumbled nearer and nearer. I did not like it, that ominous sound. I would have hailed another cab, but of course none was to be found. Not at that time of night, in that place! I shrugged and went on.

"The wind sprang howling toward me. I crouched, breasting it. Wreathes of snow curled from the ground like white shadows. They writhed sinuously past me in ceaseless procession, like great white snakes, monstrous heads nodding as they wove over and under, out and in.

"A brilliant light, cold and blue as sapphire, burst from the sky. I looked up; the moon had broken through the clouds. It sharpened the snow ghosts, clarified their outlines. I saw that they were not snakes. They were white wolves, slinking, scampering. Or albino foxes, vastly magnified.

"I heard a high, clear call from the east, from across the snowy meadows and groves of naked trees like tangles of black wire. The wind died away, but still the shadowy shapes continued to rustle past me as if alive—an illusion, I gathered, no doubt caused by some ragged remnant of cloud wisping athwart the moon. I looked up; the moon was serene, unveiled.

"Sparks of snow caught the light, glinted at me like watchful azure eyes. An old, old fear from almost forgotten days stirred within me, roused from ancient slumbers. I felt that fear lift its head, felt it climb my throat as up some lighthouse tower; flowing into my eyes as though to look out upon the world it had forsaken so long . . .

"Came again the crisp, treble cry! The foxen shapes paused, turned back to the sound, hung swaying in air. I had the fantastic impression of being within a crowd of dogs, all turned toward their master, tails wagging.

"They lifted their heads, sniffing. From their throats rolled the howling which I had thought was wind. Answering them, the sweet call. And now I knew the voice. It was that of—Yin Hu!

"It was too strange to be real; just my knowing

this may have been a factor toward saving me. I told myself that I was light-headed from liquor and in no condition to trust my senses. In the telling, it seemed that the fox shapes blurred, settled toward the ground.

"Before they could melt into drifting snow, I discerned a rusty glow far ahead through the skeletal trees. Probably a traffic light, I told myself. It was not! Traffic lights do not glide from side to side, nor increase and diminish in size. And it was not the ruby-red of a traffic light. It was, as I have said—rusty.

"Nearer and nearer it drew, unflickering, serene as the moon itself. Sharp-edged, an egg of rubiginous radiance.

"To it the fox forms yapped and keened, pranced up on hind feet, dancing, their excitement mounting as it swept closer and closer still. The oval of light was now less than a hundred yards away, leisurely gliding over the snow as if on runners.

"Within it was Yin Hu! The light, like mist, like translucent glass, partially screened her from my eyes. It was less Yin Hu than the impression of her. She was naked, her finely slim body tinted by the rubescence, so that I saw her as though through a colored filter; she might have been dipped in reddish dye. Her hair streamed like a clay-reddened waterfall down upon her shoulders, glanced from her breasts, thinned vapourously below her hips, the white lock in it like foam. There was nothing of mortal woman about her; rather it was as though, at some hellish masquerade, an animal were wearing human disguise. From the incandescent white lock of hair, the blazing sea-colored eyes, the sharp little chin thrust forward, to incredibly narrow feet—she was not woman. And once behind her something plumelike, white-tipped, flickered . . . like a tail . . .

"Now she was but fifty yards from me—now thirty—now ten. The glinting eyes of the foxes turned, following her flight, raying more and more toward me in full consideration as she advanced.

"I told myself : *It is only illusion, illusion!* I said within myself: *You have been thinking too much of Yin Hu, Pierre!* My voice shrieked within me: *You have worried yourself into this! She is not real! Reach forward, touch her, and see!*

"My hand would not respond to my will. Fear snapped my nerves, cutting off all communication between muscles and brain. I was numb.

"The white foxes grinned, all their eyes centred now upon me. The windy tumult of their yapping slurred into piercing whines—hungry whines, eager ones. Slowly Yin Hu raised an arm, pointed at me, the red light quivering like a breeze-tumbled bubble. The white ghosts flattened in one massed crouch. Yin Hu dropped her arm; the white shapes sprang forward, thousands of them—straight for my throat!"

He paused, regarded his son sternly. "You may not believe. You may say—he was drunk, he merely imagined it. But fear had cleared my head of fumes of alcohol. As for imagination—" He shook his head, continued:

"What saved me was purely involuntary. A

sour, whisky-flavored belch! What we call, these days, a burp. Its nauseating taste, as it swiftly arose, sickened me; before I knew what I was doing, before I could think, I was retching. All thought of foxes and my peril had vanished in that wave of nausea. Then I remembered—I looked up!

"But the spell was broken. There were no foxes, no ovoid of light containing Yin Hu. Clouds were sweeping over the moon, hiding the bare stretches of snow and the shivering trees beyond.

"There was nothing but wind driving a few tattered streamers of snow. Yet as I watched, the snow began to assume form again, though not so strongly as before. The impression of contour strengthened, weakened, gathered power. Subsided, then arose fresh. Yes, I could discern the indistinct lineaments of white foxes, but the moon had hidden itself; there were no sapphire sparks of eyes.

"I turned. I walked very rapidly back toward the cab I had left. The wind wailed—I began to run slipping and stumbling on the ice.

"The cab-driver was still at work on his tire, a flashlight on the road. He stopped as I drew near; clapped his cold hands and blew on them.

"I said: 'Let me finish the job.' I did not want to think, just then. The driver said: 'Thought you was goin' to walk?'

"'Changed my mind,' I answered, stooping, starting to work. 'This happen often?' I wanted him to talk, to keep on talking. And talk he did. By the time we had put away the tools, picked up the light, I was nearly back to normalcy. When we reached Charles' house I had convinced myself it was all imagination. Now I am not so sure. I think I have had a narrow escape."

Paul offered no comment. After all, Lascelles had explained it himself—Yin Hu's magic preying on his mind. Tingling cold, a chance reference to Yin Hu's chilling touch, the senses fuddled by alcohol, resulting in a particularly vivid state of delusion. A most happy state, Paul reflected, for Yin Hu if she really intended Lascelles' death. The man might have collapsed from fear and in that penetrating cold, been frozen.

Too bad he hadn't! The muscles of his cheeks twitched as he thought so; he glanced hurriedly to his father, making himself smile. If Lascelles saw the twitch, he concerned himself only with the smile. He said:

"You may laugh if you like. Will you still laugh, I wonder, after seeing Yin Hu?"

Paul thought: *So far, Yin Hu appears to be nothing more than a superb psychologist, preying with slight suggestions upon men's consciences until she has them seeing and experiencing things that don't exist. Well, from what I've heard of them, they deserve it. More power to her!*

He asked nonchalantly: "Why have you come here? If the girl's a witch, as you think, what can I do?"

Cunning oiled Pierre's expression; he chuckled. "You? Ah—you are my ace in the hole!"

"Pandejo, I don't follow you. You remarked that lady foxes object to horses. Are you by any chances thinking of me as—a stallion?"

Pierre grimaced. "I have been forced back to

my first idea, that of appealing to the girl's human side. If we could make her stronger than the fox, and that would be no little enterprise . . . the fox is bound to vengeance by a vow . . . a promise . . . and a desire . . . if we could waken in her something stronger than those three bonds, we could kill the fox in her; crowd it out of her consciousness, at least submerge it."

Paul thought: *He's not telling me everything. As long as the fox remains in the girl, there is danger. Surely he knows it! But I am not supposed to know—why not?*

He asked: "And what thing is stronger than the vow, promise and desire of the fox?"

"Love!" Lascelles cried, leaping from his chair. "Love!" he repeated, slapping his son's shoulder sharply. "Love," he murmured more softly, pacing about the room.

Paul could not resist the sarcasm: "Pardon me, but isn't that—coming from you, Pandejo—a trifle overdone?"

The man was at the window, lifting that tattered, grimy curtain, looking at the complex, spiky patterns on the frosted pane. He turned, dropping the curtain. His voice became soft, caressing, mesmeric with poetic feeling.

"You think so? But I, Pierre Lascelles, tell you that—it is not so! All too well I know that tender passion, soft and easily bruised as a fragile flower, delicate as a web of woven moonbeams, intangible as the scented summer wind! And so dreadfully powerful that nothing is proof against it. For love of Helen, Troy fell; for love of Thais, Persepolis was burned; as Ishtar dared face the terrors of the Underworld for Tammuz, so Orpheus dared them for Eurydice. Since history began, sages have deplored and reviled love because it overshadowed their wisdom. All their bitter remarks availed them nothing! If still in India, despite civil laws, widows fling themselves on the blazing pyre; if England's king abdicated from his throne for love of a woman; if every day people lie and steal and kill for love—will not Yin Hu forget the fox in becoming a woman?"

Paul thought: *A pretty speech, and indubitably a true one. Still—he's not taking me into his complete and final confidence. Oh, well—small matter. Whatever he wants, I'll do—to a point. Then I'll leave him. As for the possibility that Pierre's tale might be fact, he thought: I've heard much about fox-witches—but this will be the first time I've ever seen one!*

Lascelles said, with incredible naivete: "If the fox-woman should fall in love with you, she would spare me, your father, because of her love for you."

Paul thought: *You mystify me—but you don't fool me!* He asked: "But why should she love me?"

Lascelles' worries vanished from his face as abruptly as though a light had flashed on it. He went to his son, dropped hands on his shoulders. Paul winced, as though the slime of evil deeds on those hands could sink into his clothing, sear his skin like acid. The old man's fingers dug deep.

He cried: "Why—look at you! Well-made, well-muscled—strong and stalwart!" He leaned forward, leering, his breath tinged with decay. He

whispered slyly, winking: "You have pleased many women, have you not?"

He stepped back, triumphant: "As you will please Yin Hu! Bred quietly, confined from all emotional experience, what does she know of love? You will sweep her off equilibrium, stir her to the core . . ."

Paul did not like the sound of that. He thought: *Sejanus had a daughter . . . there was but one pretext for which they could kill her . . . is that what is in this man's mind?*

He demurred: "Yin Hu is a fox!"

Lascelles laughed: "Remember—she is also woman!"

Paul affected to consider. *I don't give a damn one way or another . . . I needn't go too far . . . just so the Old Man gets his deserts . . .*

He put out his right hand. "I'm with you," he said—but did not qualify to just what extent. If Lascelles had any doubts, he did not evince them. He took the proffered hand, clasped it strongly, binding the contract. It seemed his touch—tingled.

Paul thought: *I'm no swelcher if I don't regard this compact as sacred. Pandejo has his reservations, too! Though both men smiled in most friendly fashion, they studiously avoided each other's eyes.*

Lascelles became brisk. "You can come with me when—now?"

Paul said: "I've no ties—beyond a rent bill three weeks overdue."

"Ah, that!" Lascelles tossed his head airily, reached for his billfold. They gathered Paul's few belongings, stuffed them into the worn bag which had traveled wherever Paul went; paid the landlord, though it meant rousing him from his warm bed.

A limousine, incredibly black and glossy, long enough to serve as a Pullman car, waited at the curb. Lascelles bowed Paul inside, nodded to the chauffeur, a stolid Oriental. The car sped up Tenth Avenue, turned at Fifty-ninth Street, angled again at Fifth Avenue, paused at the door of the Meredith home in the Sixties.

In the cold air Lascelles' breath streamed scarf-like behind him as he guided Paul to a side-entrance, opened it with his key. They entered a neat, narrow hall—yellow parquet flooring, Pompeian red walls with painted garlands pendent from the ceiling moulding. Up several steps, around a bend. The servants' sitting room, shabby genteel with its castoff antique furnishings. Paul was not sure whether he glimpsed a Chinese on one of the chairs; what he saw, as he passed the shadowed door, might have been a Buddha. Then the dark kitchen.

"I will show you to your room," Lascelles said. "It is late—far too late for introductions. Tomorrow you will meet them all. This way!"

They climbed back-stairs to the second floor. Paul saw a well-carpeted wide hall, crystal-chandeliered, many doors opening off it. They climbed to the third level. It was still well-carpeted, but not so wide a hall, the crystal electroliers confined to wall-fixtures. Lascelles opened a door.

"Your room," he said. Like a hotel bellman he set down Paul's bag, went to the windows, raised them slightly, adjusted their shades; he opened

the bathroom door. "Everything has been arranged to your satisfaction."

He glanced about, making sure that nothing had been neglected. Satisfied at last, he nodded to his son, lifted a palm in farewell salute. He went out.

Paul's bedtime preparations were simple; a bath, the brushing of his teeth. He slept in his skin, a habit he had picked up during his wanderings, when laundry difficulties precluded such luxuries as night-dress.

Before turning in, he studied himself in the mirror; was pleased with what he saw there, but wondered if Yin Hu would find him as pleasing. Well, wait until they met—he might not find her so pleasing, either!

With that thought, he went to bed. Once the lights were out, he became conscious of a weak, spicy fragrance; perhaps the linens were scented. It strengthened like the gradual accumulation of incense smoke. Probably, he thought drowsily, now that his eyes were closed, his olfactory perceptions had sharpened. It was vaguely like pine; he liked it.

He had trained himself to sleep instantly on lying down; now he dropped deep into sleep. But as he sank deeper and deeper into blackness as of a bottomless well, he heard sleet tapping the windows like the pattering of light and dainty feet; and a soft, cool draught caressed his cheek like the touch of a dog's muzzle . . .

VIII

HE sat up in bed, reached to the table for his watch. Two o'clock! Why hadn't someone called him? He dressed hurriedly, stepped out into the hall. As he descended the stair he heard a movement on the second floor. He paused on the landing.

He saw—Jean Meredith!

She had been on her way to the stair, heard him coming, and halted, Fien-wi behind her. Both women wore the sleeveless, high-necked gowns of blue silk, embroidered in silver, which Lascelles had likened to uniforms. Uniform, dress, whatever they regarded it, provided the only link of similitude between them. There was nothing striking about Fien-wi; a short, heavily built woman of uncertain years, ageless as many Orientals after the passing of the first bloom of their youth. Weak-chinned, thick-lipped, flat-nosed, her face would have been stupid except for her eyes. They were black, but there were lights within them—like lamps burning in dark caverns. They were so exceptionally distinct that they might have been jewelled inserts in her face; pearl for the whites, gold-sprinkled onyx for the irises, rimmed with black enamel.

Her hair was deep brown instead of black, held so perfectly in place that it might have been painted on her scalp. Her skin was the color of a mulatto's, though nothing else in her suggested the Negroid.

She was very human; the chunky body, chin, lips and nose attested to it like lettered labels. An air of mellowness hung about her, a comprehensible if somehow antique mellowness which comes generally from love and service to humankind, most noticeable in Irish grandmothers, in old midwives and faded Latin women. Almost felt, almost seen, it was like a brown aura; and the youthful penetrating eyes denied it utterly.

There was conflict in this woman, conflict between the purely human body and the inhumanly wise eyes. If Yin Hu were possessed by two contending personalities, then so was this brown woman; he pitied her for that lurking unrest. And abruptly forgot her, rapt on the girl.

She was slim as the princess in the old French fairy tale whom the slightest breath might blow away; the loose dress, falling in vertical folds, accentuating her slimness. Her hair was parted in the middle, swept against the sides of her head in two smooth buns directly behind the ears, held in place by pierced sandalwood combs. It was an Oriental coiffure, but the bronze-flecked hair with its suspicion of a wave was not Oriental. Nor the face beneath it, the clear grey eyes under level brown brows, the straight little nose with its slight upward tilt, the sensitive mouth of a child over a chin elfinly pointed. No trace of lip-rouge or other dubious improvements on nature. Perhaps that was why she seemed so young—barely sixteen—a dreaming-faced Juliet in Celestial masquerade.

Or perhaps it was because her face contained no sharp trace of character. As though she had never matured while living sheltered and emotionally asleep in the timeless world of the foxes.

She had been startled. Her hands, incredibly slender, the fingers tapering like long white candle flames, were pressed to her breast. Her lips were parted as though silently prolonging an exclamation.

Paul's heart went to her—not with desire, but with esthetic appreciation of her loveliness. This was Yin Hu, the fox-woman? Impossible! He narrowed his eyes, peered for some sign of the inner conflict which he had sensed in Fien-wi; found not a trace of it. This girl was as innocent, as charming, as some sunlit flower.

He remembered with a start that many beautiful flowers are poisonous as cobras . . . he laughed. She did not respond, nor Fien-wi, who hung behind her like a shadow, eyes downcast.

Why was she staring so? Surely she'd seen a man before! Well, perhaps not many Western men . . . He would have spoken to her, but admiration and wonder had numbed his vocal cords. Nodding, smiling, he descended toward her.

The girl drew back, matching him step by step, and behind her Fien-wi drew backward. The girl turned away, cast one last glance over a shoulder, then ran lightly, swiftly, passing the brown woman, toward a door at the hall's end. On its threshold she rested, peeped back once more; as she slipped from sight Paul imagined that her lips quirked in the beginning of an answering smile. Ceased now the shadowhood of Fien-wi. She did not run; she plodded laboredly after the girl, vanished beyond the doorway. The portal shut

with a sound like a sigh, wafting to him the merest breath of aromatic scent, recalling the perfume of the night before.

Closed door or open, Paul knew they watched him as he proceeded downstairs—as though their gaze were tactile as curious fingers, plucking here, prodding there; exploring him, comparing him—with whom or what?

In the foyer, a yellow-skinned lackey appeared it seemed from nowhere, bowed and led the way through a picture-gallery into the solarium; bowed again and noiselessly slipped away.

He looked into a court which was a copy, feature for feature, of the antique Roman peristyle, save that its center was glassed rather than open to the sky. An occasional spray of sleet pattered pleasantly on the panes. Outside, it was winter; here within, summer was kept willing captive.

Doric columns fluted and corded, without pedestals, upheld the ceiling about its glassed portion, making a portico. They were painted brilliant ochre. The floor was paved with dull yellow marble, the walls lined breast-high with the same stone, then coated black and decorated with rows of scenic masks in gold.

In the space enclosed by the columns was a small fountain in whose white bowl an alabaster Triton poured water from a tilted shell; it arose from a flower-patterned mosaic. On each side, bordered by azaleas, were square pools in whose dark waters goldfish, like angry red candleflames, flickered among the stems of reeds and darted under the slashed circles of the lily pads.

Between the fountain and each pool was a bench of white stone. Two men, whom he gathered were Charles Meredith and Wilde, occupied one; on the other, Lascelles sat in company with Margot Meredith. Before the woman was a small, ivory-footed table of citron wood, the grain peacock-eyed with knots; she was bent over it, pouring tea.

Hardly had his eyes roved the court when Lascelles observed him, whispered to the others, arose and approached. "Slept well?" he inquired, clapping Paul on a shoulder and leading him toward the benches. After introductions, he made room for Paul beside him.

"How do you prefer your tea—strong or weak?" Margot asked, taking up a cup. He told her, finding her voice as richly low as a sustained 'cello note. "Lemon, or sugar?" He told her that too. She paused in her preparations, eyed him boldly. As boldly, he returned her appraisal.

He thought: *She's far more fox than Yin Hu—if the girl I saw upstairs was really Yin Hu. Time doesn't exist for this woman. Or if it does, it has been good to her, better than to most mortals—or she commands it as her slave.*

She must have been, considering Charles Meredith's age, in her late forties at the youngest. Yet women of thirty-five would have been envied her face, unwrinkled except for slight lines around the eyes. Her cheeks were but faintly hollowed, the weak shadows accentuating the beauty of the underlying bone structure and proclaiming the centuries of careful breeding which had produced it.

He wondered how one might classify her face; decided to call it cameo-English. It was apt, for her skin was very white against the golden-brown shadows of the walls. A low, broad forehead, a double curve of sweeping brows and eyelids; the nose aquiline and a trifle long; delicately moulded sensuous lips, a softly rounded chin above the gracile throat. Her ash-blond hair was drawn back simply, archaically, in a casual chignon and bound with golden ribbons; she wore a long hostess gown of *directoire* influence, a chemise-like tunic of pleated, smoke-colored chiffon, banded at the bodice and edged with woven leaf-motifs in gold. The soft material provocatively lined her flawless body; she might as well have been naked.

Her dark-blue stare lifted to the muscular Triton in the fountain, settled back to him; he knew she was making comparisons—favorable ones, judging by her smile. Leisurely she offered him his tea, handed him a plate of still-steaming scones. With an effort he wrenched his gaze from her, accepted tea and scones, attempted to relax.

"Don't burn yourself!" she warned, eyeing his mouth; he felt the physical impact of her gaze on it as if she had kissed it. He reddened.

Charles Meredith asked: "Think he'll do?" His voice was like the thin and querulous hum of an insect. Paul's flush deepened; for a moment he thought: *He knows what she's been thinking, just now!*

"Perfectly," she drawled, turning again toward Paul. The others were scanning him also, but he was conscious mainly of her regard. He thought: *It would be a damned sight more open, more decent, if she'd simply come over and touch me where she's looking . . . what do they think I am, something they're buying? He answered himself: And what else?*

Margot repeated: "Perfectly. The girl is bound to love him." With relief he saw her eyes leave him, caress Meredith. "If I didn't have you, my darling, I would love him myself!"

Meredith's eyes tightened to resentful slits as he passed her his empty cup. He was only the remains of a man in a carefully tailored suit which no longer looked well on him. In his youth he might have been a dashing athletic figure; in later years he had grown bulky, perhaps with a paunch. But in the last few months, perhaps even weeks, all excess weight had melted from him, leaving him with sagging skin everywhere—hanging in tiny hammocks from his cheekbones, swinging in wattles under his chin, lapping over a collar become slightly too large, and bunching on his knuckles like mountain-ranges on a relief map. Whether he bore resemblance to Yin Hu, Paul could not tell; the pendulant skin was like a disguise. The man was little more than a rangy skeleton outfitted in a skin several sizes too large, with clothing in keeping.

His abundant, wavy hair was the blue-white of an albino's, but his sparse brows and lashes were dark. His eyes were so shadowed by overhanging skin that it was next to impossible to discern their color.

As for Wilde, if there were any truth in the theory of prenatal influence, his mother had been frightened by a dachshund. He was all long face

and long torso, his arms and legs woefully short, almost dwarfed. Sallow-skinned, yellow-eyed; his long and flat nose merging into a receding forehead from which lank, sandy hair was brushed back. He was clothed in soft brown material. But if there were anything canine in his expression, it belonged to a furtive cur. Paul definitely did not like him.

Margot returned Meredith's cup, now filled; she centred her interest on Paul. She asked: "Do we seem rude in our staring? Yes, I imagine we do. But now that you have joined our little group of conspirators, you cannot deny us a certain amount of curiosity. As my niece would say in her quaint Chinese fashion, 'When hunting dragons, choose well your armor.' And you, my dear, are our armor."

Charles' voice crackled and sputtered as though heard through an amplifier beset by interference: "The whole thing's poppycock!" There was conviction in neither his eyes nor his tone. He looked, rather pitifully, to Wilde for assurance. His voice strengthened as he went on, but the words fell mechanically from his lips as if well-memorised.

He contemplated Paul. "Pierre has told us about you, and you about us. You and we should know the situation exactly—but do we? So far, the picture has been all in your father's viewpoint."

Wilde's head was nodding in rhythm with Meredith's words; Meredith said: "I think it a viewpoint that, while interesting, may stray occasionally from cold fact. He fears Yin Hu, thinks her a fox incarnate. I do not. Eccentric she may be, I grant—because of her upbringing. But that she was sent to punish me—to punish us, rather—that I do not believe."

He scanned Wilde, who nodded complacently—a teacher pleased with his pupil. "I sent for the German and your father, yes. Partly for old times' sake and partly, not because I required help against magic tomfoolery, but because danger always threatens a man in my position. I am old; I deserve tranquility of mind; with the German and your father near me, I thought to pass on to them any personal responsibilities which might arise. But von Brenner was a superstitious fool who persisted in regarding my niece as a witch; he died entirely through his own doing. Neither my niece nor myself is in any particular responsible."

He paused, his forehead wrinkling as he watched Lascelles; the man was teetering on the bench, looking first behind his son and then Margot as if he had misplaced something. He leaned far forward, peeping under the seat.

He said puzzledly: "That is odd. My cup is gone."

Margot touched the table. "You gave it back to me," she said.

"I did? But I do not remember!"

She filled it, gave it to him. She said: "We've heard your version, Charles. Here is mine. I say that you are afraid of Yin Hu—because of something in the past—"

Wilde injected hurriedly, indirectly defending himself: "You mean the way he acquired his money? He need have no qualms! Business ethics never differ from the pushcart peddler of Essex

Street to the stock-exchange tycoon. Dog eat dog! Unpleasant, but unalterable."

As hurriedly, Meredith furthered: "The money was Martin's—and do you think Martin amassed it without exploiting others?"

Lascelles finished sarcastically: "All money is dirty—let us acknowledge it."

Margot's smile was that of a cameo: a cold simulation of feeling. "I was not speaking of money. Charles fears Yin Hu because of something farther back than that—a trip to China—"

Her eyes struck Paul sharply; he guessed that she wondered how much Lascelles had told him. She said: "It is needless, his fear, based only on the grounds that Yin Hu is not like us—as indeed she must be, considering the manner in which she has been raised. But he reads sinister intent in her most innocent actions. It is no more fair to her than to himself. I say that if we can transform Yin Hu into a woman of our own mode of thought and living, a Western woman with Western ideas—there will be nothing peculiar about her to set his imagination working overtime."

Wilde nodded acquiescence to this; Paul asked: "I thought she threatened you?"

Margot tossed her head, exhibiting not only her state of mind but her exquisite throat. "Any chance word can be construed as threat!"

Paul forwarded: "And her magic?"

Color at last touched her cheeks. "What magic?"

"I've been under the impression—"

She cut him short. "There has been no magic! Nor attempt at it."

"But von Brenner's death?"

"Entirely his own doing." Curious how she repeated her husband's words. Yet he agreed: "I've thought, myself, that it was only a matter of psychology."

Her eyes dwelt on him, for once without feminine speculation. She said at last: "We are not intriguing against a witch and her magic—dear me, no! Our interest is merely to orientate Yin Hu to another way of life. The external to sway the internal. No woman needs a psychologist to explain another woman to her, Erwin to the contrary." For Wilde had twitched in silent disagreement. "Perhaps you don't know what new gowns and a few beauty treatments can do to a woman's mind as well as her body. There's nothing like a daring ensemble to bring out a woman's sophistication—and if she hasn't it, she feels it expected of her, and consciously or not, you may be sure she acquires it. So much we can do for Yin Hu—but there is more to it than that."

"I have introduced Yin Hu to my women friends, yes—but no matter what the occasion, whether a bridge party or a wedding, women never congregate except to impress each other. In her present pathology, Yin Hu doesn't favorably impress my friends, nor they her. Like insanity, her Oriental training has placed her in a world apart where nothing can touch her. At the least sign of criticism, she can scurry into her little haven of indifference and slam its door."

"It's not healthy for her," Margot said. "We should keep abreast with our times rather than dwell in the past with the ghosts of long-dead philosophers. A distinguished British writer once

observed that Caesar, Plato and Jesus, sitting a thousand years in council, could never have invented an automobile or an electric stove, because those objects belong in an era to which their brains had not evolved. Well, Yin Hu is accepting the ideology of the ancients and trying to apply them to the world of today. And it can't be done successfully."

Lascalles said: "I am materialistic, God knows. Yet I say that Caesar, Plato and Jesus, not to mention Yin Hu's philosophers, perhaps could not invent the motor-car—but they understood human nature. And since their time it has not been changed."

Wilde said curtly: "You think not! We psychologists have learned the *why* of the mind, the formulae of its chemistry. That worn term 'human nature' is definable as mankind's slavery to emotional stimuli. Psychology can control those stimuli, twist them into any desired direction. More—create and destroy them!"

Lascalles observed: "Nevertheless, the people of my acquaintance think today as others thought, centuries ago."

Margot said practically: "At least Yin Hu is doing so. She's all intellect, and intellectuality goes just so far with a man. She should become like the rest of us women, or she'll end her days as a literary spinster—the kind who looks hopefully under her bed each night for a burglar. She has never lived, and never can live until she is taken from her morbid dream-world and made to feel something. Once she discovers she's a woman, she'll forget all that stuffy nonsense."

Wilde demurred: "You forget, she is manifestly schizoid."

Lascalles said sourly: "Your technical words confuse me. I wonder if you intend it so—and whether they confuse anyone else."

Wilde said: "What do you mean by that?" Lascalles shrugged blandly. The psychiatrist would have spoken, but prudently checked himself.

Margot broke off a bit of scone, turned and cast it into the pool behind her bench. The flame-like fish bolted to the crumbs, rayed in starry points around them, nibbling.

Paul said: "In summary, if Yin Hu is brought to feel the basic emotions of desire and ambition, she'll be like anyone else." They were all agreed. "But why go to all that work? Why not merely pack her off to some place where she can't trouble you?"

Margot answered lamely: "But we owe it to her—to help her make adjustments—"

He crossed his legs, settled himself comfortably. "You know—for a while you've had me thinking as you'd like yourselves to think. From all I've heard, I suspect that Yin Hu is happy exactly as she is. Why change her? Because you're afraid of her; you must be." He smiled at Meredith's start, Margot's gasp; he went on: "You, Meredith, have more than enough money. If you liked, you could buy her a bit of property, settle an annuity on her, and leave her strictly to herself. Yet you don't. Why?"

Meredith choked in his attempt to answer. Paul said brutally: "For one thing, because you fear her even at a distance—at least as she is now. For

another, because you have always resented her."

Meredith, still strangling, lifted a hand for silence; it clawed the air. Wilde's eyes were the sulphur of a hurricane sky. It appeared that both Lascalles and Margot were deriving a modicum of pleasure from his speech; Lascalles', self-righteous agreement; Margot's, admiration for aggressive masculinity.

He said: "You feel that her money should have been yours from the very start, and now that you've got it by hook and crook, she shall have none of it. But you're quite willing to spend a great deal—certainly as much as would make her independent of you—employing such persons as von Brenner, this man"—he pointed to Lascalles—"and myself, just to spite her. Oh, well . . . I suppose you can afford your spite."

"Why haven't you committed her to an asylum? With your money, you should be able to arrange it. I know you've thought of it, but you haven't followed through with it because you think that she's a fox, an avenging angel; that through her magic she can escape from any asylum or prison, if not indeed capable of forestalling any attempt to apprehend her. So you want her harmless."

He laughed because the incoherent Meredith reminded him, just then, of a bubbling percolator, tumbling drops of jumbled words. He said:

"I'm not afraid of offending you because you'll never dismiss me while you think you can use me. None of the men in your social circles suit your purpose for the conversion of Yin Hu. No matter if they're willing to woo her because they find her attractive or for the bribe of a dowry—they can't succeed because they don't know what she's really like, and you can't tell them without losing prestige among them."

"So you send for me to win where they lose. Fine! I don't believe in fox-witches, but I'm all agog to meet one. Whatever my private sentiments, I'm to make the girl love me. I'm a sort of *gigolo de luxe*, where you're concerned. Let it stay that way. But don't expect me to guarantee results when you present me with a retouched picture of the situation. For—whether you realise it or not—you've been lying to me, you and you!"

He nodded at Meredith, who managed to say clearly—" . . . insult me in my own house!" And he nodded at Margot, who smiled shamelessly.

He said: "You pretend you see eye-to-eye with Wilde. You don't! He and I are here for the same reason—if his methods don't work, perhaps mine will. If the snag won't burn, the axe may cut it."

Margot sang: "Charles, dear, stop fuming! He's completely within his rights."

Meredith's nails scraped the arm of his bench as he clawed himself to standing position. As with a badly synchronized sound-film, his lips moved but the words did not correspond with their motion. Staggering, he shut his eyes, clenched his hands in their loose gloves of skin, fighting for self-control. He opened his eyes, became intelligible. "You damned pup! Get the hell out of here!"

Paul arose, thinking: *There's plenty of hell in here, at that!*

Margot left the bench, drifted toward Paul,

nearly the same height as he; the psychiatrist stood, and Lascelles. Surreptitiously her fingers tweaked his sleeve; peremptorily she whispered: "Apologize!" Lascelles nudged Paul, nodding.

Paul said: "Perhaps I was unnecessarily blunt—"

Shaking with rage, Meredith raised a knotted hand as though he gripped a stone, would have thrown it. But abruptly Margot went to him, began arranging his tie, her eyes signalling the others to look toward the door. Tuke, the butler, was wheeling in a tea-cart. Wilde immediately sat down, as suddenly as if pushed. Lascelles followed suit; Paul affected interest in the fountain's figure.

If the scene struck Tuke as in any way out of the ordinary, he did not betray it. Margot gave Meredith's tie a last approving pat, then appeared to discover the servant. "Oh—Tuke! But what have you here? We've already had our tea, don't you remember?"

He said tonelessly: "Remember? No madam." But he paused.

"Why, yes! See, here are the things—" Margot swept a hand toward the table.

Something of puzzlement crept into Tuke's demeanor. "I see an empty table, madam."

All turned. The pots of tea and of hot water, the cups and plates of scones, even the napkins had disappeared. There was not a crumb. Meredith jerked as Margot's fingers gripped him; Lascelles craned. A spark of cunning kindled in the psychiatrist's eyes.

Tuke waited statuesque behind the tea-cart. Margot swallowed once, twice, before she said: "I'm afraid we don't want any tea, Tuke."

He bowed stiffly, carefully swerved the cart, stepped precisely toward the door. They waited in tableau until he had gone. Then Margot turned from one to another. She asked: "Do you think that Yin Hu could have bribed him to do that?" She laughed shakily, passed a hand over her eyes. "But no, of course not. Still—everything on that table is gone. Where?"

Wilde said, leering: "Lascelles might be able to tell you."

The corners of Lascelles' mouth dragged down as he asked: "You suspect me of whisking them off—say, in another dimension?"

Wilde retorted: "You're being absurd—but absurdity won't help you. I say that through sleight of hand—"

Lascelles bristled: "And why should I do that?"

"Let us be frank," Wilde said. "You've disliked me from the first, as I have you. I am, in a manner of speaking, Mr. Meredith's physician; he is under my treatment. You correspond to the primitive witch-doctor; you see that my methods are succeeding, and realize that you aren't needed here. And you don't like losing a steady income. So you go to this length to frighten Mr. Meredith into accepting superstitious twaddle as gospel—"

Lascelles put out a hand, purely as signal for the man to stop speaking; Wilde thought a blow was aimed at him and cowered. Lascelles said: "You are at liberty to search me, Dr. Wilde, if you think it possible for me to conceal an entire set of tea-things on my person. Or look into the

pools, if you think I could drop cups and plates into them without sound. I have not moved from this spot—if you imagine me capable of casting tableware into the flowers at this distance, you compliment my accuracy in throwing."

Wilde's yellow eyes blinked, and blinked again, like warning beacons. He stirred restlessly, settled back. Then: "I *will* look!" he cried. He sprang up, leaned over each bench, looked narrowly into the pools; he went to the azalea borders, poked among them. He did not return. He said, from a distance: "You're cunning, Lascelles. You've put them securely away. But I'll find them—if I have to call in every servant in this house."

Rather than answer him, Lascelles turned to Margot, asked: "Have you two identical tea services?" She shook her head. He queried: "Then what was on Tuke's cart?"

Her eyes opened wide, then dwindled to thin lines. She murmured: "You mean—it was magic?"

Wilde snuffled laughter. "Magic!" He did not approach, would not; remained where he was, tensed as though prepared to run if Lascelles approached. Meredith trembled, swayed. Margot supported him, grasping one of his arms; he stared blankly ahead.

The 'cello strings which produced her voice buzzed as though the bow had scraped a false note. "The slut! I don't call it an amusing joke!"

Paul said: "When I came down here, I was hungry. A moment ago, I felt as though I'd eaten all the courses of a banquet. Now I'm empty again. All the same, if what we were eating and drinking was illusory—the goldfish didn't think so. I saw them eating those crumbs."

Lascelles asked curtly: "With whom are you siding, boy?"

Paul said: "For the moment, none of you."

Wilde started for the door, rigidly erect, ridiculously dignified. He stopped, said nastily: "I could have the servants search—but I'm thinking it would be of little use. Knowing your calibre, Lascelles, I suspect they're part and parcel of your plot. But," he wagged a warning forefinger, "if another incident of this nature should occur, one of us will have to leave."

He appealed to Meredith: "This man undoes everything I accomplish for you! When will you realize that?" But Meredith was still mired in torpor and did not answer. Wilde's yellow eyes smouldered; he marched onward to the door, short arms swinging.

Margot tugged gently on Meredith. "Come, Charles!" Gradually he emerged from apathy, submitted to her leading. Carefully she guided him around the pool, past pillars, toward the entrance. Once she looked back, toward Paul. Her gaze lifted to the Triton in the fountain, wonderingly. The brown shadows of the court tinged her cheeks, warming faintly the hint of her smile.

They had not observed that dusk was lowering; it was time to light the bronze lamps swinging from chains between the pillars. The shadows were thick in the corners, welling up from the floor, blackening as though stealing the color from the pools. The sleet-fingered panes overhead turned purple with twilight.

Paul said to Lascelles: "I never thought of you

as a sleight-of-hand artist, Pandejo."

The other man's forehead knotted. He growled: "You know I had nothing to do with it!"

"But the only alternative is—magic. I can't bring myself to believe in magic."

Lascalles turned to go. "Believe as you will—the facts remain the same."

Paul reached after him, but would not, did not, touch him. Nevertheless, Lascalles paused. Paul said: "Perhaps we can compromise. You told me that you saw the phantom bowmen in the Temple of the Foxes because the priest Yu Ch'ien touched you, and through that contact gained control of your mind."

Lascalles dipped head in assent. Paul said: "Yin Hu touched you today?"

"Yes, all of us. We were playing *go* in the game room before you came down; our fingers could not help brushing against each other."

"But I wasn't there! She didn't touch me—she still hasn't touched me!" Hardly had he spoken when he remembered, with a crawling sensation, the cold breeze in his bedroom, the night before—so like the caress of a dog's muzzle; the odour of pine.

Lascalles said: "Surely she can make contact in other ways. Is it so strange?"

Paul said obstinately: "Then it's still hypnosis, not magic."

Lascalles said: "No it's magic—in the sense that magic is unorthodox science whose laws we do not understand."

The clustering shadows almost hid one man from the other; the fountain was a blur of looming greyness. Through congealing murk, Paul saw Lascalles' mouth twist in a bitter smile, as again the man moved to leave.

Paul said: "I'll be damned if she's a witch!"

"Then you are soon to be damned, my son!"

IX

AS he dressed for dinner, changing from sportswear to the blue serge suit which must serve him as dinner-clothing until he could purchase something else, he was conscious anew of the aromatic fragrance; paused while knotting his tie, jerked his head from this side to that, sniffing. He went to the room's corners, inhaled deeply; stepped to the windows. The scent was of equal strength in all places.

He shrugged. It was a pleasant perfume—why should it irritate him? Then he knew; it was as though there were eyes in it—watching him, spying on him!

Utter nonsense! Yet the sensation persisted.

He finished knotting his tie, glanced in the mirror for the effect and saw—or thought he saw—another face beside his own. As if someone were peeping over his shoulder. He swung around—none was behind him! He turned back to the glass. The face, if there had been one, had disappeared.

He paused, rubbed a hand perplexedly over his face. He thought: *This thing's contagious! I'm doing exactly as the others—worrying myself into seeing the impossible!*

He thought: *At least I haven't a guilty conscience. Whatever I see will be different! He wondered: Maybe I should get out of here—before this thing takes root in me? And answered: What have I to lose? And I've experienced everything else—why not a few choice illusions?*

Far within him something stirred, lifted as if in warning, sent up the merest ghost of a whisper before it subsided. It was Cathleen Bennett's voice . . . if actually he heard it: *Would you draw us from our quiet graves to live again in your mind—suffering all we suffered before? Child, I loved your father—and loving, forgave him. Your quest to avenge me does not sanction my forgiveness—you disturb my rest. And a small girlish quaver—could it be from his sister Mary? I was so peaceful, lying here in the dark . . . Oh, why did you awaken me?*

He could not repress the tremor which rolled through him, could only stand waiting for it to pass away. *That was true sorcery—and it was my own doing!* He looked to the mirror. As before, the second face was behind him, vanishing as he perceived it. Whose face? He did not know—it fled too quickly for identification! there had been only the impression of it.

Hide and seek . . . peek-a-boo, I see you . . . He was shocked sober by the inane gurgle oozing from his lips

Already his mind was traveling at break-neck speed into the unreal, spurred by the perfume! He thought: *If Yin Hu placed the perfume here, she knew what she was doing . . . hell, it's still nothing but psychology!* Considerably cheered, he braced himself, scanned the mirror a third time. There was no other face.

Dinner was hardly worthy of the name, socially speaking. Meredith and his wife had their meal sent up to them in their rooms! Wilde sent a message that he had a headache and no appetite, and Yin Hu had gone on one of her nocturnal excursions into the park. Only Lascalles and Paul sat at the long table, eating little and scarcely speaking.

Once as Paul reached for his water, light glanced in starry burst from the goblet's thick spiral of stem. In those raying points of fire he saw in miniature the face of the mirror!

He stiffened, his hand hanging inches above the goblet. At the movement, the gleam traversed to another point, the face vanishing—but now he had recognized it, that of the girl in the hall, the girl he had thought was Yin Hu and whose face could never belong to a witch.

Lascalles had not missed the sudden, arrested motion, but beyond a raised eyebrow he asked no questions. He had trouble enough of his own—frequently he would tip his head as though listening, his fork jerking as though keeping time to rhythms meant only for his ears. And he would squeeze his eyes tightly shut, force them wide—as if a film covered them which he thought to blink away.

After dinner Lascalles took Paul to the library, handed him an unaddressed envelope, said:

"More next month of the same," and left him. In the envelope were ten hundred-dollar bills.

Paul was in no mood for reading. He wandered listlessly, found a music room opening off the picture-gallery; sat down and rippled through a Chopin waltz. A Chinese lute lay on the piano shawl. It murmured indistinctly in sympathy with the piano's notes.

The waltz broke off on a sour chord. Paul went to the foyer, put on the hat and coat which an impassive Oriental, Tuke's relief, held ready for him. He stepped out upon the stoop. The freezing air cut his nostrils and stung his eyes.

To the West, across the Avenue, was the entrance to the park, its stone gateposts patterned after the garden-ornaments of the Japanese. The sky was tinged rusty-red with the city's lights—like the firelit roof over Hell. No stars were visible, but the moon shone sharp and brilliant, tinting azure the snow of the park's softly curved hillocks. On a breast of stone, a patch of ice glimmered silver.

He thought: *Yin Hu needs a fox's fur to stay out on a night like this . . . what can she be doing?*

He shivered, abruptly returned inside. He gave his hat and coat back to the servant. In the library he explored one book after another, seeing neither print nor pages. When he went to bed, there was no fragrance. He slept dreamlessly. In the morning Margot wakened him by tapping on his door. As he sat up, she peered around the portal, entered.

"May I come in?"

She seemed cheerful enough, as if yesterday's riddle never had been propounded. Perhaps Wilde's explanations had satisfied her. She wore flowing bottle-green velvet, her silver-blond hair piled high on her crown and bound with green. In contrast with the color she wore, her skin should have at least been flushed with pink. But it was as white as yesterday, the translucent white of alabaster. She was very like a statue from the decadent period of Rome, robed modestly by its discoverers.

She leaned against the post at the foot of his bed, her hands caressing it while she smiled at his naked shoulders. All at once he felt like an exhibitionist, and lay back, pulling the covers up to his chin.

She said pleasantly: "You learn what a man's really like when you see him sleeping. I looked in on you a while ago. I like you with your hair mussed—it makes you look faunish. May I sit down?"

He indicated a chair. She rested on the bed's edge, one hand not far from his face. Leaning over him she said: "I hated waking you, but so much has been planned for today that we'll have all we can do to keep on schedule. First we're going shopping for something suitable for you in evening wear; then we're to pick up my niece and have luncheon. After that, a trip to the museum—Yin Hu's curious about its Chinese collection. Then dinner, a play, and perhaps cocktails at *La Maison Vitree*. Does it sound interesting?"

He said that it did. She brushed the smooth back of her hand over his cheek. "Whiskers—I like that! There's a Grecian statue like you in

the museum. Remind me to show it to you while we're there."

She left him. They met again at breakfast when for Meredith's benefit she reiterated the day's plans as if mentioning them for the first time. Meredith barely nodded; he was absorbed in Wilde's account of an Alpine expedition during which one of its members, in hypnagogic state, had scaled an hitherto insurmountable peak. As at last night's dinner, Lascelles was haunted by ghosts of sights and sounds almost to the exclusion of sociability.

Margot took Paul in her own car to a haberdasher's and picked his purchases for him, would not let him pay for them; charged them to her husband's account. At her request he sat behind the wheel when they went to meet Yin Hu. She did not move close, but she implied intimacy by saying: "I like the man to take things over." He was both a trifle amused and a trifle sorry.

Meredith's chauffeur had brought Yin Hu to the little Cornish restaurant; she was waiting for them at a table. Margot introduced them. Yin Hu gave Paul a slender hand, white as Margot's own, startlingly cold; she pulled it back before he had barely touched it. The chill lingered in his own fingers, lessening as it crept in needle-jabs up his arm like abnormally swift poison attacking his nerves.

He thought: *She's never the girl in the hall! At best, she's only her sister.* His disappointment was so keen that perforce he wondered at it.

She wore the long, high-throated dress with sleeves loose and deep. It was not blue but rather the color of last year's leaves, damasked with butterfly needlework of slightly varying hue. Her coppery hair was dressed like that of the girl in the hall, but secured by a comb carved from the opaque, sand-colored stone known as "dead jade" which the gods were reputed to have worn. It ran around the back of her head in an unbroken curve from ear to ear.

Her disparity to the other girl was less in feature than expression. Her eyes slanted, were blazing green; her head, habitually thrust forward on her slim throat as though she were breasting incessant strong wind, recalled to him the sculpture of the Egyptian queen Nofretete.

He helped Margot to a chair, seated himself, then asked Yin Hu: "Yesterday—I saw someone like you in the hall. Or was it really you?" She nodded politely, indifferently. "You ran from me! Did I frighten you? If I did—I apologize."

Again her head inclined, disinterestedly as before. Margot regarded her with speculation. He said: "But you were like another person then!"

She watched Margot open a jeweled case, take a cigarette from it. She said, her tone the hum of a bell tossed on restless cold waters: "Perhaps it was the effect of the light. In brief, an illusion."

There was no reason why his heart should have sunk as it did. She asked: "Which aspect do you prefer?"

He said regretfully: "The one of yesterday."

The green eyes hardened. "You are candid rather than gallant!"

Margot was waiting for him to light her cigarette. He covered his chagrin by performing the

little service. Margot blew smoke, remarked: "I wish you'd brought your old *amah* along. She might have liked this place."

"You are too kind. Fien-wi distrusts things Western." Her eyes swung again toward Paul—angrily, as though despite misgivings she were attracted to him. Margot smiled slyly.

They ordered their food, ate. Yin Hu, spooning her soup, murmured reflectively: "It is pleasant to eat!" Margot and Paul nodded, wondering whether she was complimenting the cookery or merely attempting to jog conversation. She added didactically: "It is one of the few things which is not illusion."

She contemplated her spoon with distaste. "Ugly," she observed, shaking her head. "No love went into its making! It is one of many made by machine—a mass-product made for mass-minds. Ah, were it not lost time, I could love you Americans—so childish—so benighted, eager for truth, and therefore all the more benighted! Like one who, lost in the endless swamp, wanders headlong into danger, saying: 'If I go but a short distance more, surely I will find a path!'"

Paul followed her gaze, seeing as though for the first time the wallpaper's pattern, the picture-moulding and the electroliers.

"So much decoration," she said, "and so uninspired and meaningless! Made only for money—placed here because it is expected by eyes which would miss it, yet never see it. In my home, barren space is preferable to the insignificant. Nothing not unique in itself is created—except possibly for export. China"—she smiled sadly—"is becoming Westernized!"

"The carvings on our furniture, the very shape of our doors are symbols reminding us of the greatness of the gods. Muezzins, ever calling us to thanksgiving for the bounty of those gods." She offered first one the spoon, then the other. "Would you wish this to remain forever in your family, a treasure to be passed through the generations? No! Because there is no soul in it, no life all its own. Why then do you tolerate it at all?"

Paul said: "You make heirlooms sound like amulets."

"And why not? They are talismans of loved traditions, the symbols of our ancestors, who chose the paths our lives must follow."

Paul said: "But not everybody can afford to have furnishings specially made."

"No," she answered. "It is not that. When your most refined people rebel at the common article they but borrow from other nations by adopting their wares. Why have you no great craftsmen? Because here they could not become great—and if they could, they would starve. For the rank of your people are not educated to good taste—it would be unprofitable for their overlords if they were. They know nothing but money and the scramble to obtain it. Think you they would live voluntarily in a bare room for the privilege of enjoying the ancient vase in its niche? No, they must have a vulgar show of many things; the old story of quantity before quality. They take no pride in one peerless jewel. No, they must display many artificial ones. 'Why not?' they argue. 'The

effect is the same.' To a discerning eye, the effect is not at all the same."

Paul hinted: "You seem to have learned much in your nightly rambles."

She stirred slightly, took her eyes from him as though leaving bodily. Faintly he heard her whisper: "No . . . I will not . . . not yet."

Margot twitted: "Perhaps you've been peeping into windows!"

"More," Yin Hu answered, still in that whisper. "Into men's hearts."

Paul thought: *That was a nice pleasant dash of cold water!*

Yin Hu continued her comparisons between the world of white and yellow men. At last Margot chided: "Oh, fie, Yin Hu—must you always be so critical? Can't you respect what others like?" A little crossly she reminded: "It's only polite, you know."

"Is it polite to stand idly watching a child wade beyond its depth?"

"And what are you doing besides letting the child drown—while scolding it for its carelessness?"

Paul grinned. Margot seemed to have scored at last. Yin Hu said: "You ask why I do nothing! Perhaps one day I will do something . . . in the meantime, I study my environment, seeking a rope to throw our metaphorical child."

But though she was disconcerting in the restaurant, she was charming in the museum, taking them on tour of the Chinese rooms, explaining antiquities to Margot in such detail, spiced with legend and anecdote, that other visitors edged closer to eavesdrop.

When the interest of the onlookers became too pressing, she retreated to an adjoining room. Paul said: "For a while, I had the feeling that you resent me."

"If I said I do?"

"Nothing. You've your right to your likes and dislikes."

"Now which is it wiser to fear—the invading army or the men who sent it?"

"You speak in a riddle?"

"But you said—it is my right!" Her interest shifted from him to a *tanka*, a painted temple banner. He heard her gasp. "A *shen* painting—here!"

It was a large, somber water-color on smoked silk, mounted on brocade which had faded through the years to ashen grey. In each corner a demonic figure sat enthroned on curling cloud. Its center was a complex landscape—a tree-bordered stream, pavilions, rocky peaks rising from forests and seas of mist. Monochromatic, it subtly suggested color—as if its single tone were only an atmospheric effect.

"*Shen* painting?" Margot asked.

Yin Hu's face was strangely, merrily aglow. She said lightly: "Yes—they are most rare. They provide resting-place for supernatural pilgrims; for passing spirits and lost souls can enter and dwell within them. When Tsong-ka-pa organized the 'Yellow Church' in the fifteenth century, most of them were destroyed. See, in each corner is one of the Lokapalas, the gods of the cardinal points."

Margot pondered: "Haven't I seen something like it in your rooms?"

"Yes, my painting is also *shen*."

Paul asked: "And do ghosts live in it?" He grinned. "When you look at me like that, Yin Hu, I expect smoke to roll up from your eyes—they scorch me!"

She said sweetly: "I am reminded of the fate of one who would have kissed the sun."

"What happened?" Margot asked.

"*P'ei*! He became a cinder."

"In other words," Paul said, "Curiosity killed a cat! You mustn't mind my curiosity, Yin Hu. I can't help it—you're so unlike my conception of the shy and retiring Chinese women."

"But this is not China—and you would have me Westernized!" Her face was serious, her tone jesting: "Does one apologize to the rain when seeking shelter from it?"

Margot's gaze had been straying wistfully to the door. "Now that we've seen this collection, Yin Hu, I'd like to look at the Grecian sculptures—there's one I want especially for Paul to see."

Yin Hu's eyes sparked knowingly and wickedly at that; became even more knowing, more wicked as they entered the hall where plaster and marble gods and goddesses, warriors and Amazons loomed larger than life, so realistically conceived that awesomely they suggested reconstructions of a vanished race of beautiful giants.

Margot paused before the athlete attributed to Lysippus. Naked, nine feet tall, he held a scraper to an outstretched arm and gazed with blank eyeballs over their heads as though blind and listening.

"Stand over there," she directed Paul, backing away and squinting. She sighed. "Yes—you're very alike." Again she sighed, this time exaggerating the sound until it could pass for humor.

Yin Hu inquired: "This statue is your ideal? Then you do not love my uncle?"

Margot snapped: "Good Lord, of course I love Charles! But this is something different—surely you understand." Her voice softened. "The part of Woman that no man may know or understand—"

Yin Hu seemed doubtful. Margot laughed, remarked lamely: "Sometimes, my dear niece, you frighten me—there's so little of the feminine in you!"

"Am I so masculine, then?"

Paul scanned her, announced without recourse to gallantry: "Certainly not!"

"Neither feminine nor masculine," she mused, looking at the statue. "What am I, now—I wonder?"

Paul grinned. "You're addicted to guessing games."

She laughed without malice, said to Margot: "You like this man because he resembles the statue. Why is that?"

Margot said slowly: "Because the statue is the only touch of perfection ever to enter my life."

Yin Hu commented half-sarcastically to Paul, half-kindly to Margot: "But this man is—human. And therefore assuredly not—perfection. Cling to your statue; it can never disillusion you."

Paul thought: *It's getting so that I jump every time there's a reference to illusion.*

Margot argued: "All the same, it might be worth disillusionment . . . if my statue could walk and talk."

"What a pity," cooed Yin Hu, "that it cannot be arranged!" She was feminine enough to read rightly Margot's sudden, angry flush. She said swiftly: "Is it not late, time to meet the others?"

Margo said resentfully: "So it is." She beckoned to Paul, her tone defiant: "Come along, my statue!"

They returned to the Meredith house, parted to prepare for dinner. As he entered his room he heard water spattering in the bathroom. The morning's purchases had arrived; his dress suit was laid out on the bed. A white-coated Chinese emerged from the bathroom, ducked in a chain of quick bows, sing-songed: "Name b'long me Ling—plenty you like him. Topside dresser, yes sir." He grinned, his face mostly protruding teeth.

Paul shook his head. "Very fine English, Ling, but I need no valet." And pointed to the door.

Still grinning, the fellow folded his hands against his breast, bowed afresh. "Ling stop by order b'long number-one great lady Yin Hu."

Paul gripped him by the shoulder, headed him toward the hall. "Make'm door adrift," he advised. "Run chop-chop along Missy Yin Hu and tell her no wantee." For emphasis he gave the fellow a push; slammed and locked the door after him, ignored the subsequent faint but discreetly persistent rapping.

He shut off the water, tested what was in the tub—tepid, as he preferred. Ling must be a mind-reader. He undressed, was about to enter the tub when he scented the perfume again. He covered the bathroom mirror with a towel; snatched the spread from the bed and draped it over the other glass. Then he stopped with an ugly laugh.

Let her spy on me—a good blush ought to teach her better manners!

He tore the covers from the mirrors, deliberately performed an obscene little war-dance before each one of them. And climbed into the tub, considerably inspirited. The tapping at the door ceased.

As he lathered himself, he thought: *What in hell's the matter with me? I'm following right in the others' tracks!*

I hate scented soap, and that's where the perfume came from—this soap. I was having the creeps when I first thought I saw the face in the mirror; I continued to see it because subconsciously I wanted to see it. I want to believe that Yin Hu's a witch because of what she can do, as a witch, to Pandejo. But I most positively don't want to delude myself into any false assumptions. I must have the true picture of things. Or I'll be off on a wild goose chase all my own and Pandejo will get off scot-free.

If she's true mistress of magic, why send Ling to me? Unless to spy on me—so she can prey on my weak points. Or perhaps slip me a Mickey which will shoot me off into dreamland, convincing me I've been witnessing magic. And that's no more than good, solid psychology.

Yin Hu—are you fox or aren't you?

Fox or not, one thing's certain—she's gunning for the Merediths. And Wilde. And Pandejo. And maybe—me? She didn't mention the shen painting, nor cast hints about that statue, for nothing. She was sowing seeds in our minds—seeds of suggestion, to sprout and develop into rank growths of self-delusion.

Suppose yesterday's tea was drugged? While we were talking so cosily and complacently, an army might have walked through the court, snatching the dishes from under our noses, tearing up the benches, smashing the fountain—and we'd have kept right on talking. Drugs have had stranger effects than that!

He snorted a short, rueful laugh:

Small chance I have to make her love me. She's ten jumps ahead of me—she knows why I've been brought here—that's why she went out of her way to be unpleasant to me. When she amused us with nursery fables in the car, told us the tale about the egg that tried to batter down a stone wall, and asked me to remember the stain—it was a warning.

He wallowed, splashed, rinsing himself. Briskly plying the towel, he thought: *I never went out of my way to make a conquest, but now my vanity's hurt. She makes me feel like a worm, one she might find especially loathsome if she could bring herself to study me. Damn her—I'd like to return the compliment!*

The girl of the hall—the one I thought I saw, any way—she'd never make me feel like this! Too bad she was only a trick of the eyes!

He dressed, started downstairs and encountered Margot on the way. She wore a décolleté black velvet gown, Princess style; no jewelry except a choker band of Arabian pearls. Her hair hung loose in a smooth long bob. In the soft light she might have been thirty.

Temptation wafted from her like an insidious perfume. As if she had tugged on him, halting him he stopped. She drifted close, lifted a hand to flick at his lapels, finger his tie, her eyes direct on his and demanding. Hardly knowing it, he bent his head, his lips seeking hers which she was lifting, offering—

What the hell! He jerked back from her unabashed triumph. He said curtly: "Nix, Margot! I'm not playing."

She did not answer, nor her expression change. He asked brutally, seeking to wound, to drive away some of that victory: "If you don't like Meredith, why don't you divorce him?"

She laughed. "What—and lose all his money? Don't be silly!" Her lips twisted, were no longer compelling. "I'm in this as deeply as he. When my poor, dear brother-in-law was murdered by the big, bad bandits—I could have been righteous and deserted Charles. But I didn't—nor will I now."

She drew away, lounged lazily against the railing. The effect was as though she had moved even closer.

Paul said: "If you leave him, he'll settle money on you."

"But not—everything. And I want all or nothing." She pouted prettily. He thought cattily: *She's every bit as good an illusionist as they claim*

Yin Hu to be. Giving the impression that she's young—when she's almost the age my mother would be if still alive! Poor Cathleen—she wouldn't be looking as youthful as Margot.

She shook him from reverie. "And that applies to you, my darling. All—or nothing."

He twinkled. "But I'm here for Yin Hu's benefit!"

She ran a hand over his shoulder. "Since you made Charles resent you, I'm footing your bill," she reminded. "You're staying because it is my wish. You can make Yin Hu love you, according to contract, but if I don't think the picture's pretty—in other words, if I should become jealous—off you go! I always get what I want from Charles, you know—and I'll have my way with Yin Hu. And," her voice struck a savage note, "you'll be no exception!"

"In the words of the old song—your gold will never buy me."

Her fingers fidgeted on his shoulder. "Don't go moral on me, sweet. If you don't like the sound of clinking coins, you wouldn't be here. Nor"—she smiled—"asking why I don't get a divorce. Even if I did, I wouldn't marry—you!"

"Suppose I tell you I'm not here for money?"

"Suppose I answer that I'm less stupid than you think me?" She smiled again, winningly, tweaked his ear. It was difficult to remember that she must have done the same to many other ears in the last twenty years. She whispered: "Don't you like me—the least little bit?"

He caught her hand, took it from his face, but squeezed it before letting it fall. He said evenly: "Yes, I do like you, Margot—quite a lot. But that's all."

She straightened furiously from the railing. She spat: "I suppose you're falling for that half-breed wench!"

"She's hardly a half-breed—"

"It amounts to the same thing!"

She shrugged off her rage. She said: "If you think I'm going to behave like the proverbial woman scorned, you don't know me. I'm not like other women. Besides"—she cupped one hand, moved the other set of fingers above it as if dropping something—"clink, clink!"

She laughed without resentment. He could not help laughing with her. They continued down the stair. She summarized: "So now we understand each other, do we not—my Greek sculpture?"

But he had caught sight of the others awaiting them in the foyer. They were chatting as amiably as if rancor had never touched them. His attention focused on Yin Hu and he asked non-committally: "Do we?"

Her gaze searched his face, then shot from it to the woman and dwelt on her. She clenched her fingers, opened them.

She said, with mingled irritation and humor: "My rival!"

X

COLORFUL as was Yin Hu's costume, its taste was impeccable. A plum-colored ceremonial coat extended down to her knees over a magenta skirt; a trace of pleated petticoat was visible. From one shoulder of the coat to the other, like an ancient Egyptian pectoral, ran a wide embroidery of emerald and silver, its tints repeated in the silver sheen of her white skin, the emerald glints of her eyes.

Her russet-red hair shadowed her forehead in bangs, was drawn back from a central parting to a butterfly knot on her nape. At each temple was a silver rosette inlaid with the iridescent blue kingfisher feathers. Two long and cylindrical pins of Soochow jade were thrust V-shape through her back hair; they were tipped with cabochon rubies. Her nails were protected by golden sheaths. About her throat was a chain of woven elephant hair culminating in a pendant of rose-beryl.

Fien-wi waited in the background, lifeless and unobtrusive as a stick of furniture; her eyes downcast, her mistress' cloak over one bent arm.

There was no sign of tension, neither then nor while they dined. But several became apparent at the theater. Lascelles was nervous, tattooing his fingers on his knees, repeating the beats of phantasmal music. Meredith raised his hands, sniffed them, cast a look of irritation toward Yin Hu as he rubbed one with the other, dry-washing them. Wilde writhed on his seat as though playing host to highly temperamental ants; in an underlook he seemed to blame Yin Hu, then—as scowling he faced the stage—to blame himself for the thought.

Margot was absorbed in the play, a typical myth in which a young advertising man, mired in harrowing difficulties, bobbed to the surface both unscathed and richly rewarded.

Paul's program was upside down. Turn it as he would, the print remained topsy-turvy. He admitted to himself: *If this is the effect of sheer psychology, I'm going to school and take a course in it!*

Yin Hu gave the performance her undivided interest, her mouth decorously prim, but dancing lights in her eyes. Paul wondered which she most enjoyed—what was happening on the stage or in the seats around her.

When the party had settled around a table in *La Maison Vitree*, he came out with it: "Now why were you so amused by the play, Yin Hu? Amused in a fashion its author never intended? Or was it something else which tickled your fancy?"

"It was the play, and it amused me indeed—because it was such obvious falsehood, and everyone so eager to believe it! Ah, the poor, unhappy people! They have so disordered, or allowed to be disrupted for them, their lives—they resort to even the weakest dreams in their search for their own souls!"

She said pensively: "If one went to them, offering them the inner peace—could they resist such an one?"

"They don't," Paul said. "See the advertisements in our papers and magazines!"

"Yet they never ask themselves why it is so," she sighed. "The thought behind the theater and this place is the same. An escape from the humdrum."

"And humdrum this place is not," Lascelles said. He was now in complete possession of himself, sitting relaxed—but his mouth was grim. From old association Paul knew that look. *Pandejo's planning something—I wonder what?*

Nor were their surroundings commonplace, dull. The interior of *La Maison Vitree* was like the vastly magnified heart of a smoky, rose-cut diamond. All but the floor was of mirror, glass or pellucid plastic—from crystal planed walls and partitioning screens to tables and chairs. Paul wondered how the management could afford maintenance costs, for the polished surfaces presented an important cleaning-problem. He decided, inspecting the numbers present, that the management could well afford practically anything. Exclusive though The House of Glass might be, its habitués contributed no inconsiderable revenue.

Whence the light came he could not guess. It was reflected in prismatic glimmerings from the beveled borders and incised designs, shifting at the slightest movement of the beholder—so that it jumped from point to point like the fires in an opal, was like the twinkling of varicolored fire-flies flitting in bewildering ballet. Everywhere he glimpsed fragments of faces, the others' and his own, sections of a living picture-puzzle so inordinately involved that piecing them together would require the employment of extra-dimensional mathematics.

The wan gleams and kaleidoscopic reflections created a sensation of the carnival, of blithe intoxication; were abetted by the drowsy murmur of hidden, soft music.

"You do not like this, then?" Lascelles asked politely of Yin Hu. Paul thought: *My, the sociability's so thick you could carve it with a knife!* Which, though he did not know, was precisely what Lascelles was doing.

"Like it?" Yin Hu repeated. "Why, yes—as illusion. It is like"—she considered—"like the moons of purest glass wherein Ching-lang stored his stolen rainbows and which in punishment for his knavery were broken, falling to earth as diamonds. It is like the labyrinth of the Wonderworkers beyond all space and time, against whose walls of crystallized thought the captive souls flutter like moths against a pane! It is also like a lesson," she furthered, pointing with a tilt of her head, "these screens which partially conceal us from the others present. They, the screens, are our masks: without them there could be no illusion. Without them, those beyond would lose all glamor, standing revealed as the commonplace ones from whom we are trying to escape. And this would become—only another ordinary chamber."

Wilde fretted: "Can you talk of nothing but illusion?"

Margot began: "Erwin, don't be rude—" But Yin Hu's answer checked her. She asked Wilde: "Can you?"

He mumbled something inarticulate, looked away. Yin Hu said severely: "To talk of something besides illusion, one must know what is Truth and what is not."

Through the transparent table-top Paul discerned Meredith's fingers squirming as if they

were itching spiders. Meredith caught the glance and frowned; stiffened his hands. Yet when he forgot them in interest over the conversation, they resumed their restless wriggling.

Lascelles said: "All this around us recalls the mirror-houses at Coney Island—where once you have entered, you cannot find an exit."

Margot said flippantly: "That's to keep the patrons inside until they've paid their checks."

With lack-luster twinklings, a partition slid aside. A waiter entered, solicited their order. Lascelles said: "If but for courtesy's sake, Yin Hu—you must drink with us."

She hedged. "But I have no need for stimulants!" And added maliciously to Lascelles as though hinting of some shared secret, "Besides—it flavors the breath, does it not?"

He was silenced as though, striking home, she had used a sledge. Meredith wheedled, heavily genial: "Oh, come, Yin Hu—I insist you take something!"

"Yes, something innocuous," Margot agreed, a dash of acid in the honey of her smile. "Such as—vodka. There's scarcely any taste to it. You'll think you're drinking water!"

It was patent that Yin Hu sensed something amiss—perhaps she imagined that her downright refusal had piqued them. She hesitated, reluctantly said to the waiter: "Yes, bring vodka, even as she has said."

"This much," Margot lifted all five fingers to the giggling waiter. He departed. She frowned at Wilde's very palpable sneer, tossed her head in triumph toward Paul, who was thinking: *If Yin Hu drinks that much vodka, there ought to be some pretty startling developments!* Lascelles had recuperated from the blow Yin Hu had dealt him; was, like the crowning oddity by way of mirrors, reflecting Margot's exultation.

Paul observed suavely: "Margot—I see you like fireworks."

"Quite," she retorted. "Especially the kind we're apt to see very soon. They do bring one down to the common level!"

He warned: "Sometimes with a sickening thud. And sometimes—a little too common!"

She misinterpreted him: "Oh, but I'm just having a Manhattan!"

As they tasted their drinks, Wilde spoke. "Yin Hu—tell us about those arts you learned in the Temple of the Foxes."

She had not touched her glass. Seeing their eyes on her, she reluctantly clasped fingers around it, even more reluctantly touched it to her lips. She set it down so suddenly that it almost seemed to fall. "This tastes dreadful!" She whipped her kerchief to her mouth. "And you said—it was no more than water!"

"Try it again," Lascelles urged urbanely. "After the first sip, there's no taste at all."

She complied, lifted astonished eyes in agreement. Then she answered Wilde: "I cannot speak at one time of all the arts I know. Is there any special one—" She paused, lightly touched her stomach. "I am all warm within! And bright—as if I have eaten a tiny sun!"

The slightest of shadows fell between her brows as she considered the vodka. Then she

swallowed so hearty a draught that Paul winced and looked away. Wilde said silkily, leaning forward: "It is time, Yin Hu, that we faced matters squarely."

She fingered her midriff again, smiling. "Time indeed," she agreed with the ghost of a giggle.

"Were the arts you learned—magic?"

She studied him. "It depends upon what one calls—magic."

"Raising storms—casting spells—foreseeing the future—"

She tossed off the remainder of the vodka, beamed seraphically. "Raise storms—cast spells—those I can do, and more. None can foresee the future, which is as a bubbling cauldron to which new ingredients are constantly added. Sometimes there are flashes—" She clarified: "If such things are magic—why, yes—I know magic."

"You really believe in it?" His tone was derogatory. Lascelles and Meredith were leaning nearer too, Meredith's hands quivering.

She included them, even Paul, in her slow, roving smile. "If to practice is to believe—can I help but believe?"

Lascelles flashed a look of triumph at the members of his party—she had vindicated his long-derided accusations of sorcery. But Wilde sat back, brows meeting. "Well, I for one don't believe—either in your magic or your claim of command over it."

"Once there was a mouse who denied that there were cats." She asked ingenuously: "You think I would deign to lie? To you?"

"You give me no proof," he replied.

She stared regretfully into her empty glass, tilted it, watched a drop roll around its bottom. She said, shaking her head: "But to you I can prove nothing! You behold only what your training permits you to see. You call yourself scientific? But you are not! A scientist observes dispassionately, then formulates his theorems; there are few bearing the name who do that. They fear the ridicule of their blind brothers. You—and others like you—work backwards! Your axioms are as pigeonholes into which all phenomena must be placed—or be whittled and hacked until of suitable dimensions!"

He said huskily, almost growling, his hands gripping the table's edge: "You slur at me!"

Her head lifted proudly: "And if I do?"

Wilde's hands tightened, went limp. Defeated, he shrugged. Yin Hu complained: "Margot—my glass is empty!"

Margot asked aghast: "You mean—you want more?" Lascelles nudged her; she peered between the glass partitions, beckoned the waiter.

Yin Hu said consolingly to Wilde: "If I offered to teach you my magic?" He bent forward eagerly.

Ruefully she shook her head, dulling his look of malign anticipation. "No—any such effort would be futile. For example—"

She rearranged herself more comfortably, indeed cosily, resting her weight on her elbows, craning her head confidentially. "I might tell you the charm whereby to summon the *huo-mo-kuli*, the Fire People. But if they appeared to you—would you not reason yourself out of all belief in

their presence? Though they blistered you with their whips of flame—still would you not insist that it was autosuggestion? The burns deliberately incurred from more mundane sources by the body, while obeying the demands of the subconscious!"

Wilde puffed a tiny, disparaging blast. She muttered sullenly: "In the silent night, the foxes hear what transpires in the lower world. And sometimes, the thoughts of men. Therefore"—she beckoned, nail-ornament gleaming, so that Paul was reminded of the leopard-women who don steel claws, slinking out on their nightly prowls—"lean close!"

His ear brushed her cheek. He recoiled a little. She whispered to him. A slow incredulous smile widened his mouth. His eyes became blank, as though—concentrating on her whisper with all his faculties—he listened with them.

Laughing lightly, she pushed him away. Again he flinched, as though her touch stung. She said sharply: "You will not repeat what I have said!"

His voice ludicrously treble, he echoed her: "I will not repeat what you have said!"

He withdrew into himself, ignoring the others; speculating, perhaps. Every now and then the disbelieving smile would stretch his lips.

She took up the second vodka, drank. Perceiving the question manifest in the attitudes of the others, she said: "I but told him how to call the People of the Flame."

Tense and more tense Meredith had become during her parley with Wilde; had often turned aside to sniff now one hand and again the other; had scrubbed them finally with his napkin.

Lascelles scrutinized Yin Hu narrowly. "Yin Hu—why do you not permit us to call you by your mother's name?"

"My mother's—my mother's name?" She was drunk, Paul saw. It tarnished her cold beauty, made it like blemished ice.

Margot cooed: "Yes—Jean."

"Because—I am not Jean!" she answered. She tipped her glass again, studied it with increasing dislike. Suddenly she squared her lips in a silent snarl and pushed it away so forcefully that it rocked, almost spilling.

Meredith's face brightened as a ray of hope spotlighted it. He crowed: "I see it now! There never was a Jean! Yu Ch'ien invented her purely to plague me—"

"No," she said sternly. "Yu Ch'ien would not—indeed cannot—lie! And there *is* a Jean!" She scanned Paul, stirred uneasily as if she found his presence highly disconcerting. "But—she sleeps."

Something rankled in his memory. He thought: *The girl in the mirror—the girl of the hall!*

"And will continue to sleep," she said harshly to Paul, silver bell dented and out of tune.

"Sleeps!" Lascelles prodded. "Sleeps—where?" Meredith waited hopefully for her to name the spot.

She struck her forehead: "Here!" She beat her breast: "Here! Warmed by the glow of the little sh-suns within us—us."

She struck the table with a little fist. "You think you have tricked me! You planned this amongst yourselves! With your burning waters, you would

break through my defenses! Be warned," she whispered. "Now be warned indeed—lest in making the breach you set free—devils!"

Her laughter jangled. "You think I am a helpless moth in your grasp—your grasp, to be crushed—no, crushed—no, crushed!"

She reined herself, if not to complete sobriety, at least to a show of it. Her voice deepened, was like the low, rolling vibrations lingering in a beaten gong. "I could put an end to you this moment—should it please me!" She regarded Paul. "To you also! But—it does not please me, not yet. No—not yet!"

She said: "You are all my little playthings—I must not break you too soon! I must try you, test you . . . with more of the truly scientific approach than Wilde . . . so that when you lie limp and discarded, I can remember you with pleasure. I can say, as I pass on to others, as I take them up, my more delightful toys—'Von Brenner, Charles . . . Margot, Wilde and Lascelles . . . they were not wasted!' "

"You damned fiend!"

Meredith's sag-skinned hands snaked toward her throat; Margot quickly slapped them aside. "Charles—no! Not here!" She peered between the screens, worried that others might be eavesdropping; she forced herself to laugh loudly, gaily. Catching her import, the others laughed—Lascelles robustly, belying his troubled frown; Paul uncertainly; Meredith cackling a shrill false note; the merest snicker from Wilde.

Through the subsidence of that unnatural laughter, Yin Hu said: "No, Charles—not here. Nor elsewhere! Tonight, had you known how to proceed—there was an instant when I might have been delivered into your hands for the breaking. You did not know the procedure—nor ever shall. For you will not have time to learn it!"

Her vision angled beyond the screens, rested there momentarily, contained cruel satisfaction as it returned. "I tell you this, nor"—as Margot abruptly moved to arise—"shall any of you so much as stir until I have done! Until now I have not declared my purpose among you. Now I do so declare!"

A swift, warm quivering rose through Paul's feet, as though they rested upon weak electrical contacts. It climbed to his knees, raced along his thighs, up throat and down arms, as sudden as one sphere of quicksilver merging with another. It rapped his muscles as if with thousands of tiny hammers, everywhere at once, like the dance of radium sparks. He could not move. Nor did any of the others stir in the slightest.

She arose, stood apart from them, arms folded, hands hidden in sleeves. Around her hung the myriad gleams of the glass partitions like sentinel stars; she was like the Princess Lan-shui gazing wrathfully from the glittering ramparts of her frosty kingdom, like the goddess of the caves of sparkling salt in the Gehenna of the Black Ropes.

She said: "There is no mercy in a *hu-li-ching*, in a fox—but there is justice. Until now I have done but little against you—for I wished to study you, to determine whether your hearts are base as your motives. And so they are! You and you"—she spoke to Meredith and Lascelles—"were to

die. But you, Margot—and you, Wilde—I thought to spare. But I cannot spare you now!”

She regarded Paul with vague puzzlement. “You alone may escape—but not lightly! If you choose to abandon these others to their destinies, to what surely must overtake them—you may go. As yet you have willed me no wrong. But lest you be tempted to turn against me—for these people would make you their tool—I shall send you forth burdened with certain reminders, that you may long remember your good fortune in escaping worse.

“You have heard! And now we will go from this place. I like it little! We will return to that home which was my father’s, and which now is yours, Charles Meredith—for so short a while! There you will await what must come to each of you; nor can any escape me by flight. I will squander no time in pursuit—rather, at any intimations of leave-taking, I will render such course unnecessary!”

To Paul she said: “You will enter my father’s house only to gather your property and go. Now all of you—do you understand?”

Still they were paralysed by the thumping of the tiny hammers which shaped their fetters on the anvils of their nerves. She gestured; the vibration ceased at Paul’s mouth, as it must have from the others’. Motionless as a painted group, only their lips moved. What they could not indicate by facial expression or by customary emphatic movements was in their voices—a ‘cello sob from Margot; Lascelles’ rasp; Meredith’s quaver, Wilde’s beaten growl.

“I understand!”

“We understand!”

She said: “Then we shall go.”

The vibration became intermittent, torpid, ceased—but with a curious intimation that it was still within the body, dormant and easily awakened. As if the little smiths had reluctantly laid down their mallets, but were prepared to swing them afresh at the slightest provocation.

With an odd sensation of added weight, Paul struggled up from his chair, the others following suit. His hands were heavy—far too heavy to lift; only to let hang by his sides.

A waiter looked into their enclosure, hastily scribbled a check, presented it to Meredith, whose face twitched as he fought to lift a hand. Yin Hu accepted the check in his stead, eyed it negligently and returned it with a bill which she must have plucked from a sleeve-pocket while unfolding her arms.

“Keep the remainder.”

The waiter scanned the money; his mouth gaped in delighted surprise. He grinned, bowed extravagantly, stepped back as though departing from royalty. Paul thought: *He’d better spend that money—quick!*

Yin Hu leading, they filed past the crowded tables. Lascelles, second in procession, wavered as though to fall back, perhaps remain behind. He stumbled, jerked forward as though on a leash which Yin Hu had pulled.

At the edge of the black floor, on the threshold, Yin Hu paused, somberly contemplated the establishment and its occupants.

She said contemptuously: “They are little

children! Their lives are without fulfillment, so they seek new experience in strange surroundings. They drink to deaden their better natures lest they heed the commands of their souls against folly.”

The silver bells carolled merrily. “Let us give someone of them the new experience he craves! But which shall it be? How to choose? All are equally stupid.”

The bells turned to base metal. “That one!” she murmured, staring.

She meant a sleek young brunette in the company of a very attentive middle-aged man. She was chattering vivaciously, fingering the stem of her cocktail glass, occasionally shaking the hand reached almost to her elbow. She peeped furtively about to ascertain that she was not alone in that admiration. The man noted this with pleasure—he leaned forward, whispered something which made the girl bridle, blush, then giggle coy consent.

She had not checked her wrap. It was draped over the back of her chair, a cape like a trailing mist of red-gold fur.

“She dares!” Yin Hu breathed. “She wears the skins of foxes! Well—hereafter she shall have more respect for them!”

Paul wondered: *What’s she going to do?*

He said urgently: “No, Yin Hu—don’t do whatever you’re thinking! The girl has no way of knowing—”

His words were cut off by a scream! And the clatter of an overturning chair as the girl leaped from her place, lurching against the table, tipping it, glass sliding from it and shattering on the floor. Followed the scrape of her escort’s chair as he hurried to her assistance; cries from those nearby.

The soft music stumbled, slurred—as if asking the question of its makers. Then it went on noisily, insistently. Waiters hastened toward the girl. She shrieked again, pointing to her wrap on the floor. Her hands darted to her temples clutching and tearing her hair as, eyes very wide, she screamed a third time and a fourth . . .

The eyes of others turned from her to the fur cape. Then other chairs scratched, more glassware broke! Men and women leaped up and clung to each other, backing against those beyond them, ignoring the exhortations of the now flustered waiters. Their mirrored fragments flickered now here, again there—weaving from wall to ceiling in fantastic chase as though every one of them sought to capture all the others and unite into a whole!

And now waiters were as frantic as patrons—and the mounting confusion touched their chief as he bore down upon them, shouting for order.

It was as though the fallen wrap were a stone cast into a pool whose waters were humankind, and from that stone the disturbance were spreading in swiftly widening rings . . . the checkroom assistants and kitchen-help rushed in, were struck and overwhelmed by the expanding circles . . .

But what was so terrifying about a fur cape? Paul scanned it, started—

For the wrap was moving! It heaved and buckled, flopped grotesquely as if alive. From it

rose piercing barks—as though it were a sackful of struggling dogs!

It gathered itself into a small bundle as though unseen hands were cramming it tightly into a ball; it catapulted high from the floor, ripping apart in the air as if exploding. Leisurely, as if on parachutes, the sections floated downward, shaping themselves into lithe, sinuous, wriggling bodies. They touched the floor, four of them—light-footed, red-coated creatures with sharp ears, pointed muzzles and plume-like tails. Foxes—four foxes!

Paul wavered, could not move. It was not Yin Hu's doing this time—it was simply that within him too many conflicting emotions were simultaneously seeking physical expression, and neutralized each other, rooting him down. One part of him would have called that there was nothing to fear, it was only illusion; another portion would have rushed to the creatures to capture or kill them; and another held him back because these were not, could not, be ordinary foxes to be routed by ordinary methods . . . still another realized that Yin Hu would be swift in terminating any course of action at variance with her purpose . . . no, he could not move . . .

And now there was no more music—only a clangor of cries that blended into a sustained roar . . . like a waterfall spattering down on mounds of bells . . . the sound of metal raking tortured metal . . . the combined blast of discordant trumpets . . .

The foxes yapped shrilly. They ranged themselves back to back, tail to tail, noses pointing to the four corners of the room like the arms on a weathervane. They poised themselves on dainty feet, red tongues lolling, white teeth gleaming in guileful grins—as though anticipating a command. Then, as if such command had been given them, they hurtled to the edges of the pressing crowd, ripped hems of gowns and trouser-legs, nipped the skin beneath them. But daintily, delicately, pausing intermittently to pick and choose their victims. Fastidious foxes.

They wedged among the people, by nip and bite herded them back to the center of the floor. Began now a swerving scramble which soon gathered into a spiralling turn . . . a human maelstrom . . .

Sudden pressure slid the glass partitions out of place, threw them one against another; cracked them. They swayed, toppled, struck the floor with the tinniest clash of gigantic cymbals, whiffing up puffs of diamond dust, their shards like squared icicles skittering underfoot, adding to the prolonged uproar a staccato tinkling and jangling as of insane travesty on the Javene *gamelan* . . . Yin Hu was smiling, remote and cold as the storied Snow Queen . . .

Up from the milling mob the foxes sprang! They scampered over the bent backs as though leaping stepping-stones of a brook! Their reflections gathered in fuzzy red mist to welcome them as they streaked toward the walls.

They merged into the camouflage of those reflections, lost clarity, blurred to invisibility. The reflections paled, thinned, vanished like dissipating smoke. There were no foxes!

The foxes had—gone!

Still the people fought and clamored amid strewn wreckage . . . but now Yin Hu's smile was demure . . . alternating on the tumult and its numbing effect on her companions . . . She touched them, waking them to action with cold shock.

"It is enough!" she decided, passing them on her way to the outer door.

She turned, beckoned:

"Come!"

XI

SINCE only with discomfort the entire party could have crammed itself into Meredith's limousine—or perhaps in furtherance of her amorous bent—Margot had brought Paul in her own car. Now they separated, Lascelles and Paul riding with Margot, Meredith and Wilde in the limousine with Yin Hu. In either vehicle much thinking may have been done, but in neither one word was said.

Margot parked at the curb, leaving the car for a servant to take away. Silently the three disembarked, were let into the house by a waiting lackey. Without farewells they parted, each to his quarters.

It was but a moment's work for Paul to pack his bag. His movements were as labored as if performed under water, curiously unreal as though he dreamed and knew he dreamed. Between mind and body a barrier had been reared, preventing communication of the two. It was as though his muscles responded not to his own but to another's will.

The will of—Yin Hu!

He did not like that sensation—that he was an intruder in his own skin, a vanquished king become helpless bystander while an usurper reigned at variance with his policies. He thought to dispel the oppression by performing some act contrary to Yin Hu's decree.

He could not break the routine by so much as lighting a cigarette!

There was no feeling in the fingers with which he snapped the lock of his bag. He grasped its handle, stepped from his room into the hall, started down the stair.

On the second-floor landing, Fien-wi awaited him!

She wore pajamas of black silk buttoning down the side. Her hair was pulled back so severely to a little bun in back, that her brows seemed drawn high out of place. A servant, she was without ornament except for the large thumb-ring on her left hand.

Eyes lowered, hands clasped before her, she bowed—so utterly without personality that she was more automaton than human being. And he wondered whether like himself she were activated by Yin Hu's will.

Then she lifted her eyes. The shock of their

message dashed against the barrier between his mind and body, cracked it, established an opening for contact between the two. His feet had been carrying him willy-nilly past her toward the steps leading to the ground floor. Now he was able to stop and stare deeply into those eyes. And more and more their impact crumbled the barricade within him.

For they were filled with hate—and more hate—and more!

It burst almost explosively from them—as though it were far more than they could safely hold. It brimmed over, spilled to her mouth, twisting it awry—burned her interlaced fingers, which tightened as though crushing something helpless with them.

They were not eyes at all! They were openings into unfathomable blackness haunted by wraiths of sickly flame! They were jet globes on whose polished surfaces indecipherable red runes formed and fled—they were peepholes into raging, black-clouded hells!

Perfect servant? Her hate transformed her into a devil!

Now what could be her ground for such utter abomination of him? What could he have done to her, even unwittingly? Perhaps she numbered him among her mistress' enemies, therefore considering him a menace to herself?

But . . . at this moment he was leaving . . . she need no longer fear him, once he had withdrawn. For fear him she must . . . else she could not hate!

A violent tremor shook her. Spasmodically her fingers uncurled. Quickly she pointed to Yin Hu's door, then clasped hands again as Paul headed that way. She did not follow, but he felt the heat of her hatred on his back.

It came to him, the reason for her fear and consequent loathing. Had he not seen conflict within her? Strife—between the humanity of her flesh and the youthful, alien wisdom behind her eyes! In some way he had contributed to the controversy raging within her, added fuel to its already flaring fires—as though her human side agreed with what she supposed was his purpose, and her wisdom as strongly condemned it.

He thought: *If I were Yin Hu—I'd send the brown woman away. If ever someone betrays her—it will be Fien-wi!*

And he asked himself: *Why has Yin Hu sent for me? Has there been a change in her plans? Does she no longer wish me to go?*

She stepped out into the hall to meet him, still in the plum-colored coat. But her hair was as disordered as if she had been pulling on it in frenzy, one silver rosette fallen away, the butterfly knot loose and trailing.

And her face? It was exotically lovely as ever, but he had never glimpsed its expression before, the quintessence of fanatic fury and insidious sweetness blent on the visage of an evil angel. Her body shook as though she tasted liquid salt, as though she were a reed on quaking ground.

Quickly, as though racing against another's cross-purpose, she threw at him something like a fragment of dark cobweb silk! It unfurled as it

flew toward him, spreading wide and wider, like gossamer indeed.

As black mist it swirled around him, obliterating all else—the blackness of blindness. And while it enfolded him, he heard a strangled cry—it seemed from neither Fien-wi nor Yin Hu. A girl's, a stranger's voice. "No!"

And again: "No! I will not have it so!"

Then utter silence, as if the shadow enveloping him were proof against all sound. The silence of—death? For he could not hear himself breathing. It was as though he were in absolute void.

Yet his feet were solid on the floor . . . or were they? He had the notion that if he dropped his bag, it would fall forever without sound. Almost he was tempted to release his hold on its handle . . . then wondered if already he had, for there was no sensation of weight in his hand . . . indeed no feeling in the hand at all . . . if he had hands . . .

He was standing at Yin Hu's door in the Meredith house? What proof had he of that? He was bodiless in infinite space!

Illusion? Certainly! One just could not be in one place at one second and then find himself somewhere else in another! But the knowledge that it was illusion stemmed from his reason, not the testimony of his senses. He hovered in all-encompassing night . . . and time was nothing . . . here in the starless vacancy . . .

Something glimmered rosily on his left, without definition or distinction other than that it was the faintest hint of light. A second glow more golden than red was on his right. There was no warmth from either of them, nothing to gauge their distance from him. They might have been the merest of sparks pressed against his eyes . . . they might have been luminous clouds of remote galaxies millions of miles in width and aeons removed from him . . . he had no means of knowing.

They were too far apart, too unlike in hue, to be eyes—human eyes at least. The space between them was the diameter of the circle of his vision.

The rosy light pulsed as if it were a glowing heart, swiftly sending forth concentric radiations . . . like scarlet bubbles forming one within the other, their edges tortured and flickering . . . like ruby lightnings! Each circle broke at the birth of a successor, its red fragments writhing, coruscating and dwindling from existence like frantic worms of colored fire shrivelling and withering to dust.

Coincident with those rosy pulsations, as if translating them into sound, was the chime of Yin Hu's voice, frantic, pleading:

"Child of my mortal sister—return to your slumbers! Turn back while you may and think no more of awakening! You are safe only in sleep over which I can stand watch . . . awake, you place us both in danger! Must you banish me by your wakefulness, fetter me in the far corners of your flesh where I can neither watch nor defend? Sleep, Jean Meredith . . . I both implore and command it! For your own safety and for mine . . . sleep. Sleep!"

The golden light throbbed and sent forth waves of its own in answer—and the voice was not the frozen silver of Yin Hu's but warmly human, youthful and wholly feminine. Real—the one touch

of reality present. It was the voice, neither the brown woman's nor her mistress', which had cried in protest as the blackness veiled Paul.

"I know that danger threatens me—but I cannot sleep. Nor would, were I able! Something calls me—and I cannot resist it. I must—come forth!"

The red light asked coldly: "This call—what is it?"

The yellow light was uncertain: "I—do not know. It is one I have never known until now."

Harsh was the red voice: "Whatever its name—you must thirst for answer! Not now!" It softened, soothed: "And it will pass away."

"It is something beyond my control! It is a call of the body . . . I think that it is . . . hunger."

"Hunger!" the red light cried. "Hunger—for what?"

"I do not know!" The golden voice faltered. "My lips burn and I would cool them . . . but it is not thirst for water. My heart is an empty vessel created to be filled, but standing disregarded on the potter's shelves, aching for service . . . aching for filling! And my hands would touch . . . my eyes would see . . ."

"You must sleep, sleep!" Stridently the red voice shouted.

"But sleep I cannot." Then: "Yin Hu—let me take power for a little while!"

The red light flared wrathfully. "The hunger you described is—love! And often you have been warned—love is not for you!"

The golden orb drew back some of its rings in a sigh. "Yes—I remember Yu Ch'ien's warning. That love must not come to me—that if it comes despite all precaution, I must fend it aside. Yu Ch'ien would not lie, but I think that he lied unknowing . . . when he said that love, for me, would be sorrow and death. It is rapturous! I cannot, will not, deny it!"

"You promised to Yu Ch'ien—"

"I promised . . . but how was I to know it was this?"

"Nevertheless," the red voice said, "you promised!"

The gold light said firmly: "I promised to ward off sorrow and death. I did not promise to turn away—*this*."

Yin Hu said icily: "It is but the brute desire of body for body . . . must you descend to the beast?"

The golden voice, sullen: "I did not summon it."

Yin Hu said: "Still you can refuse to acknowledge it!"

"No!" the golden light said. "For I remember the servitors in the Temple of the Foxes—whose faces were without life because they did not love. In memory I compare them with those in the village who loved, and whose faces were happy."

The red voice said: "Look well at the remembered faces of the lovers—on some of them was anguish. There was no anguish to the temple servants! And think well—the dog loves the master who beats it, but the love does not heal its wounds."

"Yin Hu—I would live! What is the good of my learning if I do not apply it to living?"

"It was given you for another reason. To shield you from life."

"To keep me content—within the darkness of slumber! Yet I have a body. Why was I given it if not to awaken within it and live?"

"Jean Meredith, your body was not given to you by your mother, but to me—that I might avenge her."

"She had no right to give what was not hers! My life is my own—I did not bargain it away. This is intolerable! I will have none of it!"

"Fool!" cried the brilliance which was Yin Hu. "You would destroy us both by your rebellion!"

"I do not . . . understand . . ."

"At this moment we are in utmost peril. The body we share is safe only while I control it. I must be on guard at all times, lest we be taken by surprise! Yet you would thrust me from the throne and rule in my stead. You would answer a call, yes—but remember—the call of love is for you the call of—death!"

And coaxing, crooning, Yin Hu begged: "Sleep, Jean Meredith—only a little longer, until I have had my way with my enemies—sleep!"

Paul thought: *Now why should the illusion have taken this turn? Is this that I'm meant to see? Or has it passed from Yin Hu's hands, and I'm eavesdropping? My father . . . that is, Pandejo . . . claimed that there were two personalities in the body of Meredith's niece.*

And he thought: *These are two intelligences speaking—one is Yin Hu and she calls the other Jean. And only a little while ago she said that Jean slept in her forehead and in her breast.*

I've seen Jean! The girl in the hall—the girl who spied on me from the mirrors! Then it wasn't imagination—the girl is real!

And the fact of her existence gladdened him as if he welcomed home an old friend—no, more than a friend. A lost dream.

For he saw her again, shy and young and lovely, associating her with all he loved, those things still pure to him among sordid facts. The newly-risen moon demurely veiled by trailing willows at a river's edge . . . the elusive dance of a bright-winged butterfly in a shaft of sunlight piercing the darkling glen . . . the chance effect of elfin shape in streaming cloud . . . intangible and ephemeral gifts of the high gods. And in identifying her with these things, he transferred from them to her his delight in them . . . his love for them.

What was her golden light saying? "I will not sleep! Nor can you force it!"

The red light seethed. "You pit yourself against me? Your scant knowledge is but from books, the pages containing the inaccurate surmises of mortal minds. Mine is from—Nature herself! And therefore—invincible as Nature!"

"I do not fight you—at least, not with my knowledge, which I concede is scant. My—my body fights for me. And it too is from Nature. Thus—strong as yourself."

Now he sensed a shadow of what was to come later into his life, a presentiment of the calamity to befall them all—the Merediths, the psychiatrist, Lascelles and himself—yes, and both fox and girl.

Each is as strong as the other, then? In that

case, there can be no victory of one over the other—only compromise. And if compromise, then the two personalities must blend into one, neither fox nor human, Yin Hu nor Jean. Neither immortal nor mortal, but a link between the two, a half-breed fit for neither world. And what will be the character of such an outcast, its human passions tainted by foxen purpose, its alien desires expressed in carnal grasping?

There was danger here! But could they see it?

He listened. Yin Hu was puzzling: "The call came to you, Jean—why not to me?"

Jean Meredith laughed. "For all your lore—you do not know? I will tell you, Yin Hu! Because you are not human, you cannot be touched by what is human. Though you dwell in my body, you are beyond the flesh. But I am of the flesh, and the call is to my body—and so it comes to me."

Silence.

The two fires unwinking in illimitable void.

Perhaps a minute passed, perhaps many more.

Then the yellow glow said: "This is a time when you can do nothing, Yin Hu. Except sleep—as I have slept—as you would have me sleep again."

Yin Hu asked: "It is—Paul Lascelles—you love?" And awaited no answer, crying quickly: "It is—Paul Lascelles! Now why do you love him?"

A sigh: "I neither know nor care. To love is enough. Yet . . . I think there is recompense. The river loved the land . . . and flowers were born. The lizard loved the air . . . and became a bird . . ."

Yin Hu said impatiently: "The stick loved the fire and became ashes! Now tell me—why do you love him?"

"I know only that if my lips are to be cooled, if my heart is to be filled, if my hands would touch and my eyes would see—it is he I must seek."

"But why—why?"

"I cannot say. Except that he is not like the servitors of the Temple, who were as dead men. Nor the village striplings who were as my brothers. Nor like the old, old men of this house who are misshapen monsters."

Syllable by syllable came Yin Hu's words as though between each sound she snapped her teeth: "I thought as much, when Fien-wi called me from meditation, and I surprised you—aping my magic! Sending your perfumes and spying through mirrors!"

Paul thought: *Oh, God—did she actually see me, that time I danced?*

Yin Hu said morosely: "And I thought you but amused yourself with my enemies, and I was pleased!"

Exasperatedly she cried: "Had I suspected your reason—Paul Lascelles were this moment dead! And—you—love—him! Little Jean," she cooed, sweetly venomous, "tell me—does he love you in return?"

"Is it of any moment? I am content."

Yin Hu's laughter rippled rosily like wreathing smoke rings. She said: "He does not love you—nor ever shall. He is in this house solely for the purpose of wakening your desire, that your body respond against my wishes—that I be made help-

less for slaughter. Yet remember—if I die, you die with me! For only the death of your flesh can prize me from it!"

And now Paul realized what all along had been Lascelles' plan: not to throw himself as a revered ancestor on Yin Hu's mercy once she, the fox, had come to love Paul. Well Lascelles knew that the fox could not love! His intention was to rouse the sleeping Jean, all human and suited for love, all unaware of danger and unequipped to cope with it—crowding Yin Hu into the background, rendering her harmless.

Neat trick, thought Paul. *And he seems to have done it. But that cuts me out of my own revenge on him!*

Now Yin Hu was recriminating herself. "Fool! Fool—why could I not have seen this?" She was feminine enough to search for excuses. "Because I am not earthly enough, because I knew nothing of love stronger than the will. The love I knew was beyond the physical, the love of one spirit for another. And now I am trapped by the physical, because—in my present state—I am subject to its laws. Yet—defeated I am not! No—not quite!"

She cried: "Now harken to me, Jean Meredith! You would make yourself one with my enemies? I warn you—take care! Let us rather dwell side by side in harmony, both sharing the throne of consciousness, both discussing and deciding our mutual course. This I offer you—"

Good God, Paul thought, the premonition flashing back again. *Doesn't she realize what that would mean? She and Jean would fuse into something entirely different than she seems to think—something illegitimate, insane!*

He was bodiless in this vacuity—how then could he find voice to call out his warning? He willed a message to the golden glow, concentrated on her all his demand that she hear. "Don't! Don't take the offer—"

Had she heard? Or was it her own wish? "I will not accept, Yin Hu!"

"Hear me out. I have a condition to make. If we dwell thus together, the man must die, that no temptation arise to disrupt our pact. And if you will not consent—I give you this warning. Not always can you remain awake and alert! And when you are not on watch, I will slip past you, oust you—and I will slay this man."

"I will not let you!" But the voice despaired.

"You forget Fien-wi! She is bound by oath to serve me. Though she attends to the wants of the body we share in common, she serves not you, but me! And though you lock me away, by her oath she is compelled to bring me forth—even to strike the Fox's gong!"

The yellow orb flamed. "I hate you—hate you!" It sent out tarnished and broken arcs which were sobs. Yin Hu's light waxed in fireflaughts of victorious laughter.

Paul thought: *Now I'm caught in my own snare. I came to hurt Pandejo—and it looks like I'm the one who'll be hurt!*

He wondered: *Did Jean hear me when I called to her? Can I make Yin Hu hear?*

Again he gathered all his energy to transmitting a message: "Yin Hu! Yin Hu—can you hear me?"

At last he felt heat from the rosy light—the

heat of its wrath. "I knew the man was near—but he has listened!" Then, explaining to Jean: "He is here and listening because you intervened when I would have slain him."

To Paul she said: "I hear you." The words reached him pointed, like sharp-toothed combs of light.

He said: "Yin Hu—I don't mean harm to you at all. That's not why I'm here. I came because I hate Pandejo—the man I can't regard as my father—and I wanted to see him get what he deserves."

She said: "I did not know." And hesitantly: "If you had but told me! I would have sent you away with my promise, and proof of my ability to keep it. But now the harm is done—this dolt Jean loves you—it is too late. Whatever your motive—you die!"

He asked: "Why too late, Yin Hu? I can still go away."

Jean answered: "It is too late because—wherever you go, I must follow—Beloved!"

Yin Hu said primly, with unconscious comedy: "Be silent! Have you no modesty whatever?"

"None," Jean answered unabashed, "Wherever he goes—I go with him. Or after him, if need be. But I go!"

"And doing so, obstruct my justice! Never!"

She said to Paul: "You see? I have no quarrel with you, now that you have stated your purpose. But still I am bound to slay you, lest her love for you send me into exile when danger threatens—and bring about my defeat!"

She comforted Jean: "It will be an easy death—he will feel nothing—"

The golden glow laughed, petalled with light. "He will feel nothing because I will not permit you to touch him! You threaten me—why not act? You cannot! I am in your way!"

Yin Hu whispered in crooked curves: "You have forgotten Fien-wi . . . and the foxen gong . . ."

The yellow radiance sobbed again: "Yin Hu—let us take another course. If I pledge myself to sleep, will you spare this man?"

Sadly Yin Hu replied: "Have you yourself not said that the call of love is stronger than your will?"

There was another silence. Yin Hu said: "Jean Meredith—every moment we spend in such useless talk is a moment of danger. We stand unprotected in the hall of a house where assassins lurk, this man standing before us. Perhaps even now the assassins are creeping upon us . . ."

And silence again. Desperately Yin Hu pleaded: "Jean Meredith—will you not go back to sleep before the harm can befall us?"

Slowly the aureate glimmer vibrated. As slowly the soft voice whispered: "Not while this man is in danger from you!"

"Ah, what am I to do?" Yin Hu cried in anguish. "Must you argue, quibble—risking your life and mine?"

"I love the man—and were you to die on his account, were I myself to die—I would have it so, rather than that he come to harm." Flatly she stated her sentiment: she loved him more than herself. He was to remember her words later on,

for they were the key to the tragedy which claimed all the participants in the conflict.

Yin Hu yielded, but not irrevocably. Calmly she said: "Then this is what I will do—into your hands, Jean Meredith, I place all responsibility for this man's safety. He shall go as he will about the house, subject to my vigilance, and no harm will come to him—so long as you sleep. But if ever I feel you stir, from now until I have done with vengeance—on that instant, he shall die."

Jean said: "It is well." Almost she purred with contentment: "Now I will sleep."

Her yellow glow darkened, dissipated. There was only the red fire that was Yin Hu. It swept from Paul's left hand and poised before him.

The blackness thinned; light poured through widening cracks in it as water seeps through a breaking dam. He could see details of the hall—patterned walls, a bit of window and a fragment of floor. Like oil spreading over water, the details expanded, linking themselves together into a whole.

And now he was aware of his body—so heavy that it was like a suit of thick armor around that essence which was—his soul—his thought? He was in the hall and facing Yin Hu, his suitcase still in his hand.

He realized now to what extent her coldness and derision had flawed her beauty, in times past—as if in tincturing it, they had diminished it. Now she was lovely and very lovely, all friendliness and compassion in the sea-green eyes. As though perhaps there were trace of humanity in her, after all. She raised a hand to him, and he thought of the goddess Kwan Yin, Answerer of Prayers, hand lifting in benison.

She said: "You have heard! Your weird is upon you! And you cannot go forth from this dwelling lest Jean Meredith be called to follow. Here you must stay."

She hesitated, then moved nearer.

"Understand—I bear you no ill-will. Indeed, knowing your reason in being here, I would spare you—and perhaps will, if Jean Meredith allows me. In the meantime, I would make your stay comfortable. If you like, I will give you peace—"

He dropped the bag, took a backward step. "Thanks, Yin Hu—I appreciate your kind thought, but I'm happy just as I am. I'm plenty at peace, now that I know—what I know."

She said: "You do not understand! I will give you a happy dream of eternities in a paradise of whatever sort you may choose. So that if Jean Meredith awakens, and you must die—you will be satiated with life and its pleasures and ready for death as a tired child for sleep."

He caught up his suitcase again. "No, Yin Hu. The happiest dream you could give me would be letting me see Pandejo get what is coming to him."

She wavered, then lowered her hand. "As you will," she said. "And should you change your mind—you need only come to me." Her tone dismissed him.

She looked beyond him to Fien-wi, who stood on guard at the stairway. She called to the brown woman.

Paul started for his room, passing Fien-wi, who

was now approaching her mistress in answer to the summons. Her movements were erratic, as though unmated intelligences raged within her as within the fox-woman—human and inhuman elements battling for supremacy.

She lifted her eyes to his, and again he flinched from their burden. For within them was hate . . . and hate . . .

And hate!

XII

NEITHER Meredith nor any other put in an appearance until very late on the following day. Paul ate morning and midday meals in solitude.

Despite favorable weather he remained indoors, partly fearing that he might miss some happening of interest, and partly because for his own safety he must give Yin Hu no reason to regret her parole of him.

He listened to a radio concert, was prompted by it to play recordings. The better music dated many years back and was apparently of Martin Meredith's selection. He forgot all time.

Wilde looked in from the doorway, drawn and haggard, eyes red and swollen as though he had not slept the night. He mumbled unintelligibly in greeting or apology and went away.

Paul heard a crash from the library. He went there. A servant was stooping, whisking broken glass from the carpet. Whiskey tintured the air like liquid incense.

Meredith was slumped on one of the tall leather chairs, a half-emptied tumbler in his slack hold, spilling drops on the floor. His eyes were vacancies under their curtaining lids. Lascelles stood or rather swayed at the mantel, a tumbler also in his hand, his fingers so tightly clutching it that he seemed attempting to break it. He stared at the servant's back without expression, adding a hiccough to the tinkle of the gathered fragments.

The servant straightened, carrying out the debris. Paul would have slipped away, but at that instant Wilde lurched past him and entered the room. Wilde chose the chair opposite Meredith, dropped heavily down on it.

Meredith, then Lascelles nodded greeting to him. They saw Paul but ignored him. It was as though he were invisible to them because he did not share their danger.

Lascelles asked, obviously continuing an interrupted conversation: "You were saying about Li-kong—?"

"Oh, Li-kong," Meredith murmured. "You'll feel safer knowing this, Pierre. Li-kong isn't dead. We had a—slight difference—once, and he told me to regard him thenceforth as dead. When I sent my man to interview him, naturally he was told that Li-kong had ascended the Dragon to join his ancestors. However, I've sent through another channel other investigators, who don't suspect for

whom, ultimately, they're working. And it seems that Li-kong is very much alive. They're collecting material on him—a dossier which lengthens with every report. Most interesting! He may not wish to revive our acquaintance, but once I have learned enough about him, I can force him to terms."

He said: "It seems our Li-kong has amassed considerable fortune! Apparently disbelieving in honor among thieves, he has—retired—from the Home of Heavenly Anticipations in Peking. Has become, in a word, respectable! Got religion. The mistress of bygone days is now his wife; by her he is father of a son. There's his weak point. Being Chinese, all his foreign education notwithstanding, he is proud of that son, indeed worships him. So it comes to me that he wouldn't like anything—drastic—to befall that son. My operatives are exploring that angle—to find and—er, take the son. Once he is found, once in our hands—you need no longer fear Yin Hu."

At the name, Wilde wriggled, mumbled; "She is not a witch!"

Lascelles was enough fortified by Meredith's counsel to retort: "And what we saw at the night club last night—what was that, if not witchcraft, magic?"

"Hypnotism! Mob psychology!"

Lascelles flinched: "Become technical, psychiatrist. Fain I would listen!"

Wilde said: "In Le Bon's work entitled *The Crowd*, he says that whoever and whatever the individuals composing a mob may be—their backgrounds and characters and minds in no way alike—once they have been fused into a crowd they share a collective mind. They think, feel and behave quite differently than any one of them might were he alone. There are certain thoughts, and reactions to them, which seldom arise except when individuals form a crowd."

Lascelles said, deliberately lifeless: "Hear, hear."

Wilde went on: "The psychological crowd, Le Bon says further, is a provisional Being whose ingredients are precisely the same as cells in a living body. Their combination shapes a new creature which displays characteristics of marked difference from those possessed by its single cells."

Lascelles achieved the effect of comment by a ridiculous, lurching bow.

Wilde said: "There is no reasoning with a Crowd! It is entirely emotional, for emotionally all men are alike. The Mob is ruled only by the basic similarities which are among its components. To sway a crowd, one appeals to its emotions. And are not all men to some degree mystic-minded—superstitious? Yes, even the most enlightened! Very well—the unthinking Crowd, that monstrous Being so superstitious and emotional, is exceedingly receptive to suggestions which its members would consider normally to be irrational."

Meredith said brightly, sitting straight: "Now I know what happened!"

Wilde ignored him: "Yin Hu pointed to the girl's cape. One of us saw it, raised objections and centered our attention on the cape. It was fox fur. The Crowd recognized the fur, immediately thought of foxes—a word with which

few have passive associations. A little picture flashed in many minds—an association-picture. Foxes—swift, active animals, evil-tempered and unpredictable. Deep-rooted fear of the animal-type charged the picture with life. The Crowd believed itself attacked! That was all."

Lascelles frowned at the carpet, considering. Something brushed against Paul. He turned. Margot passed him, entering the library, said: "Hello, everyone." Her voice was flat and mechanical.

She did not take a chair but leaned against a table, defiantly languorous. Despite a careful toilette she looked her age at last, her cheekbones prominent over their shadows; new lines around her eyes, the beginnings of others on her forehead. Her hair was dull as though sprinkled with ashes. Either she felt a chill or she suddenly found her most conservative dress a trifle daring, for over the high neckline, over the long sleeves, she was wearing a shawl.

None answered her. Meredith said eagerly: "Explain the paralysis, Wilde!"

"That?" Wilde asked. "We were acting collectively, were we not, against Yin Hu? Combining to make her drunk, revealing her plans. All following one purpose—all part of one aim. In other words—a Crowd. One or more of us"—he scanned Lascelles, then Margot—"was guilt-stricken, afraid of Yin Hu. He or she—or they—became so distracted by conflicting emotions that he or she—or they—could not command his bodily motions and thought himself, or herself—or themselves—paralysed. At once the rest noticed it and were similarly convinced that they could not move."

Lascelles said: "Then we need not obey Yin Hu's orders. We can run away from her!"

Wilde's scorn was lavish. "Certainly."

Lascelles crossed over to the table, poured whiskey into his glass, siphoned soda. He said slyly: "Quite convincing. Perhaps true. But tell me, Wilde—did not Yin Hu give you the power to summon the *huo-mo-kuli*? Have you tried using it?"

Wilde squirmed, face whitening. "Use—it?"

"Yes! Let us see whether it functions or not. If not, I will concede you every point. But"—Lascelles shook an admonitory forefinger—"no cheating, no pretense of forgetfulness! You must be honest with us—and especially with yourself."

Wilde's hands tightened. He spluttered: "You think—?"

"What I think does not matter! Or so you have told me always."

Wilde stared thoughtfully at the bookshelves. "I could whisper the words three times, as she said, and draw the symbols in the air. But if it were a matter of vibration—my voice is not the same pitch as hers. And the drawn symbols might be mathematically inexact, or made too swiftly, too slowly. If the portal to the world of flame opens to such makeshift key—it hardly needs key at all. Or its lock could be picked by some chance set of words and gestures. The idea's ridiculous!"

Lascelles said: "How can you judge—unless you try?"

Wilde glared, snapped: "All right, then—I will try!" But he did not.

Lascelles twitted him: "You are trying?"

"No—it's utterly senseless—"

Triumphantly Lascelles paced the floor, eyes on the psychiatrist. He said: "Are you afraid? Can that be your trouble, Wilde? You are—afraid!" The psychiatrist maintained sullen silence. Still pacing, Lascelles said: "I can see it all—the flame-people appearing, and you calmly professing to see nothing. Just as Yin Hu told you."

Wilde said hastily: "I would not do it here among you!"

"And why not?"

"Because with your believing mind, you might imagine their presence—convince the others—"

"Convince"—Lascelles laughed—"you?" He took a long deep drink. Said scornfully: "You psychologists! Basically you are human with all the human functions and needs. You have passions and desires and fears, complexes and fixations dating back to youth and perhaps others of more recent inception. It is well known that workers among the insane frequently become insane themselves—as if insanity were contagious. And your patients, while not insane, are hardly normal. Perhaps abnormality is catching? Yet you psychologists think yourselves gods! You know all about the human mind, including your own—so you think! Well, it has been my observation that psychologists are among the most maladjusted of people living. Or they would not have been impelled in the first place to study the mind and its workings. They are in the same class as the ugly ladies who cannot attract men and who compensate for it by substituting religion or some other Deserving Cause. Mental cripples using mental crutches."

Wilde bounded from his chair, short legs bent, short arms flexed, hands balled into fists.

Lascelles side-stepped him: "Can it be that I have offended you? Do you psychologists settle matters with violence?"

Wilde answered with profanity which made Margot prick up her ears. Meredith called querulously: "Here, none of that! Stop it, the both of you!"

Lascelles sauntered back to the fireplace. Wilde did not sit down again; stood glaring at Lascelles.

Margot asked: "Charles, what on earth's wrong with your hands? You're always smelling them—I saw you doing it last night—"

Meredith's glass clanked on the tabletop. He whipped his hands behind himself. Margot said: "No, hold them out—I want to see—"

He hesitated, then brought them forth. She inspected them. "They look all right." She bent her head. "I don't smell anything!"

Meredith seemed surprised.

Lascelles said: "He smells an idea. The idea that his hands are bloody and sticky. And stinking of death." Dreamily he quoted. "All the perfumes of Araby—"

"That's not funny!" Margot said sharply as Meredith added his furious stare to Wilde's.

Lascelles said: "Oh, I need no longer consider your feelings. We are marked for death—is it not so? And in death we are all equals."

He added: "It is all very well to take heart because Li-kong will aid us. But he has not done

so, not yet. And Yin Hu moves swiftly—would move swifter still if she knew what we plan. Therefore we must consider our circumstances now. I do not say that she is a sorceress; I do say that she can control forces we have never recognized nor studied. We call her manipulation of those forces—illusion. But come—what is reality? Wilde defines it as sensory impressions resulting from stimulation. Therefore, any influence that can goad the body into reflex action."

Wilde unwillingly seated himself again, but only on the edge of his chair. He nodded, his eyes speculatively squinting.

Lascelles said: "But men have been goaded to action by thoughts alone! The fervor of the Crusades . . . the racial pogroms of Russians and Germans and Turks . . . the Inquisitions . . . murders resulting from jealousy and imaginary wrongs . . ."

He said: "Then some ideas are—reality! And there is more 'reality' around us than is commonly perceived or shared, each man acknowledging only that which coincides with his own experience. Or as Wilde might say, reality is only an impression of the Crowd."

The psychiatrist snorted: "Sophistry! Fallacy! A jumble of metaphysics and esoteric nonsense!" Lascelles retorted: "I think you have already been put in your place, Wilde."

Margot murmured: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio!"

"Dear me," Lascelles remarked, "we seem to be entertaining Shakespeare's ghost."

Meredith said caustically: "You know so much, Pierre. What a pity that—marked for death—you can't put your knowledge into use and save yourself."

"And you in the bargain." Lascelles smiled thinly. "Ah, but I can do that—if I have time."

Paul thought: *You're doing fine, Pandejo. You don't dream how close you've come to success.*

Margot sniffed. "But if reality is only relative—how can you possibly fight Yin Hu?"

"By discovering her kind of reality and meeting her on her own ground!"

Which is exactly what you've done, Pandejo!

Margot was none too sure of that method's success. Listlessly she said: "I telephoned *La Maison Vitree* this morning. I pretended I wanted reservations. It's closed indefinitely for repairs."

Lascelles said: "Yes, I saw the papers today. The girl claimed her wrap had been stolen during a riot resulting from a slur at her honor. Evidently she believes in advertising her problematical purity. Others gave out that they were attacked by foxes which probably escaped from some breeding-farm or zoo. Tomorrow it will be forgotten except by the participants in the inevitable law suits."

Wilde pulled up one sleeve, looked at his wrist watch. "I must go upstairs—I've things to do."

Lascelles grinned. "Such as calling up the *huo-mo-kuli*?"

Wilde looked more than daggers at him—a whole assortment of cutlery. He lifted his chin as he popped up from the chair; he collided with Paul as he strode from the room. "Damn you!"

he spat. "Why can't you look where you're going?"

Lascelles called after him: "An excellent comment on the psychological mind!"

Meredith said: "I'll have no more of this, Pierre. No more tiffing with Wilde. If you don't like him or me—you don't have to stay on here, you know."

Lascelles saw Paul, said cursorily: "Hello, son." To Meredith: "And if I cannot go?"

"Didn't Wilde say you could?"

"I have tried going—could not."

Margot said curtly: "Then if you must stay—keep to yourself." She added, less curtly: "What you've said about reality in essence, Pierre, sounds reasonable. But I can't quite agree with you. I sense something faulty underlying it. I sense—"

"Exactly," he said. "You—sense! You will be stirred to some future deed by your ideas."

Meredith dragged himself erect. "Enough—enough! We'll have no more futile discussions of this sort." He nodded farewell to them, stalked unsteadily away.

Lascelles said to Paul: "I thought you were ordered last night to leave. Yet you are here. Why is that? Are you tempting Fate by defying Yin Hu?"

Margot said hopefully: "You've disobeyed her—and nothing's happened!"

He lied, and realized the weakness of the lie—but he was too pressed to be scrupulous in his weighing of words. "Yin Hu hasn't seen me since last night—so how can she know I'm here, and defying her?"

He did not like Lascelles' calculating scrutiny. The man had recognized his evasion. He sought to mislead with further excuse: "I'm not afraid of her, Pandejo. To me, she's no witch. Just a psychologist like Wilde."

Margot said: "She'll be down for dinner. If you're wise—you won't. Psychologist or witch—she's nothing to disobey openly."

Lascelles interpolated smoothly: "On the contrary, he will be present at dinner. Margot, do not forget—he is our shining hope!"

He said to Paul, as a teacher to a pupil: "You will be charming to her tonight. Especially charming! We will leave you alone with her in the soft lamplight of the solarium. You will admire her. She will preen herself. Then you will become unhappy. She will ask why. You will make some bad excuse, piquing her curiosity. At last you will confess. Despite your utter unworthiness, you love her! I think you understand the process."

He returned to Margot: "So we will meet her on common ground! As a fox she is susceptible to flattery—or she would not seek to impress us with her power. And as a woman—not lightly will she think of love."

Paul thought: *Suppose I do as he asks—rather than risk Jean's awakening, Yin Hu will make quick end of me! Well—time enough to worry about that when dinner's over. I'll invent some reason for getting away—*

Dutifully, as pupil to teacher, he answered: "Yes, Pandejo."

And wondered at the sardonic gleam in Lascelles' eyes.

XIII

DURING the dinner Yin Hu asked Margot about fashion trends, Meredith in regard to financial maneuvers and Lascelles concerning the wonders he had seen in his travels. If she had questioned them from pure interest or courtesy, their short answers would have rebuffed her. And they did not. Her attitude was exactly as though they furnished her with the information she sought—and if her inquiries were subtle prying to discover the state of affairs among them, then she was furnished with information indeed. She did not speak to Paul, but often her gaze flicked at him like the smelling tongue of a suspicious snake.

Meredith was still the wreckage of a man who had been drinking that afternoon. But Margot had altered herself surprisingly, banishing for the most part that age which had overtaken her and cast over her its tarnishing veil. Only her deep-blue eyes were old, their color dulled like smoke-filmed lapis, and her behavior—for she sat with hands on lap like an old crone mumbling prayers in some ancient old-world chapel.

Lascelles was quite his usual self, but thoughtful. He ate little, talked less, his gaze included in that strange play of glances which shuttled back and forth, this side and that, across and around the table—as though he, Yin Hu and Wilde were contesting some telepathic game with their eyes. A highly refined form of hide and seek.

Paul wondered at Wilde's abrupt changes from almost hectic vivacity to gloomy, even furtive silence. At times the man would prattle brightly, if unintelligibly, on entirely irrelevant subjects, never quite finishing the statements he began, never pausing for answer to his interrogations, rattling along as if his mouth were a machine gun spewing word-bullets not always of the same caliber.

And the man could not sit still. He fidgeted with his fingers, wriggled on his chair as if its seat had been wired electrically by some practical joker and he were too polite to betray open discomfort.

Paul thought: *What's come over the man? Why's he so nervous? He's like a youngster who's been up to mischief and wants to hide it—covering himself by overemphasis and spouting whatever comes into his head!*

And he pondered: *Has Wilde been testing Yin Hu's secret of the huo-mo-kuli? And if so—with what result? For something's happened, throwing him off keel!*

Then Tuke, the butler, broke the lifeless ritual of the meal by entering with a telegram on a salver. And at his entrance Wilde lost color, hastily began a stumbling monolog—as though he did not see the man or refused to acknowledge his presence. But Tuke stopped beside him, offering the salver with a bow. Wilde was forced to take the

envelope. Even so, he cringed from the gaze of the others. His fingers trembled, could barely grasp the telegram. Tuke bowed again and went away.

Wilde dropped the envelope on the table as if it were stinging nettle leaf, lifted eyes and slowly, fearfully roved them over the faces of the others. He hurriedly bolted food—

Margot said: "But Erwin, aren't you going to open it? Perhaps it's important!"

Mouth full, he mumbled: "Whatever it is, it can wait." And choked as Yin Hu turned to him.

He dropped his fork, snatched up the envelope, his forefinger shaking so violently that he could scarcely insert it under the flap, ripping it open. He pulled out the paper, unfolded it—but would not look at it. Held it up to his eyes—but turned them away.

Margot said, mystified: "But Erwin—you're not reading it!"

His lips quivered soundlessly. He cleared his throat. Said: "My—my mother's dying. I'll have to leave at once."

Yin Hu's laughter cut the silence like swift silver arrows singing through the night. She asked: "Are you then my rival, Wilde, in the arts of magic? Are you then—psychic? I have been watching you, and not once have your eyes touched the writing on that sheet. Yet you know its message well!"

He dropped the telegram, scowled at her, the hatred clouding his eyes like the ash on smouldering coals.

Lascelles reached for the telegram. "Let me see—"

But Wilde snatched it again, crumpled it into a little ball.

Yin Hu remarked: "An interesting problem in etiquette. We ought not to pry—then, again, Wilde should not be abrupt with us. Ah, well—the cat's bite is but a caress, and the executioner apologizes beforehand to the man he must behead. Come, Wilde—let me see the paper."

She leaned toward him, her beryl pendant swinging and scattering pink gleams over the linen like the race of frightened little flames. She barely touched his clenched hand, yet it flew open with almost an audible snap. Deftly she caught the crushed paper. It smoothed itself out in her hand. She read it in silence, her eyes lifting over it to Wilde's face—and the green fires were merry ones, like the dance of freshly unfurled leaves in the springtime sunlight.

She asked: "Are you sure it was the message?"

Strangling on an oath, he backed his chair from the table, half arose. Her long hand reached toward him, settling him back. He growled: "Damn you! I knew you'd do something—make it read different—" Then his face burned scarlet. He shot a palm over his mouth in dismay.

Lascelles said coolly: "So you sent it yourself, Wilde!"

Yin Hu offered the psychiatrist the paper. He disregarded her. Quickly he arose.

"Excuse my hurry," he said ineptly, starting for the door.

Meredith cried thinly: "Stop, Wilde! Don't leave me!"

Margot reached out: "I've never doubted you!" Nonetheless, Wilde continued to stumble onward. Meredith swerved toward Lascelles, loose skin quivering like dangling loops of chain. "It's all your fault! And I told you to leave!" He saw Paul. "And your damned son with you!"

Yin Hu interposed smoothly: "But—I countermanded that order."

Wilde was at the threshold. Lascelles called triumphantly: "You heard, Wilde? You think you can really go?"

Margot flinched from him. "Pig!"

Wilde hesitated, plainly not intending to linger. He said: "I'm going—and nothing nor nobody can stop me!"

Yin Hu said: "Nothing nor nobody will stop you—not even your own self." She straightened up from the table. Wilde scanned her, mouth opening and closing as if he tested his biting ability. Then he swung around, passed from the room.

Margot leaped up, eyes blue explosions. She stamped a foot, almost shrieked: "This is carrying things too far! Whatever you are, Yin Hu—I agree with Erwin when he said, 'Damn you!' " She chanted it shrilly with hysterical satisfaction. "Damn you—damn you—"

Meredith's hand plucked at her. She shrugged it aside. She cried: "You tart! You indescribable slut! If you're going to kill us—do it and get it over with!" She sobbed, covering her face with her hands: "This—this is beyond all bounds!"

Coldly Yin Hu surveyed her, then the others. She said: "And was it not beyond all bounds when my father was murdered? Who are you—and you"—she faced each one—"that I should make concessions?"

Lascelles was smiling. She said: "It amuses—you!" His smile weakened away. She said: "Now I wonder why it should amuse you . . . often tonight I have seen that look in your eyes . . . what can it be that you know . . ."

She betrayed herself by her quick turning to Paul, as if she asked the question: *Have you spoken to him about last night . . . broken the pact?*

Lascelles did not miss the look. His smile returned as a ghost, haunting his lips. She said darkly: "Well, whatever you know—it can only hasten your destiny. It will not help you now!"

Margot dropped hands from her face, caught up a goblet as though to grind it into Yin Hu's throat. She dropped it with a broken little whimper; it rang but did not shatter. She wheeled and ran from the room, skirts rustling like a sigh, her sobs hanging in air behind her like trailing scarves of sound.

Now Meredith's pale lips opened, disclosing yellow teeth. He was shaking spasmodically. Peremptorily Yin Hu leaned, touched him.

"None of this!" she said metallically. "Think not to escape by any fit or seizure. If need be, I will guard your health against yourself—until your time has come."

At once he relaxed against the back of his chair, eyes closed, their lids wrinkled as crepe. Paul thought: *If he's going to use the information*

he's to get from Li-kong—he'd better get it before it's too late!

Yin Hu marched from the room toward the foyer, waited at the foot of the stair. Paul jumped up and followed her. He saw Margot huddled on the window-seat of the alcove, a limp handkerchief in her hands. She had paused in her weeping to stare, eyes red-rimmed. Suddenly he pitied her, was furious with Yin Hu. The Merediths, condemned to death, were given no chance to die with dignity. Like doomed aristocrats during the French Revolution, they must be mocked and harried, as they rode the tumbrils, to the very moment of their deaths.

For the first time, he was ashamed of himself. He thought: *God, what kind of a monster am I? In denying their right to at least humane treatment—I make myself inhuman, monstrous as Yin Hu! They deserve punishment, yes—but not in such measure as this!*

He tried to console himself: *Yin Hu will spare them! What use in torture before death—when death, by removing all opportunity to sin again, obliterates the lessons brought home by the tortures? She will spare them. All this torment is to goad them into repentance and public confession!*

But he would not remain consoled: *She's not human, and she has no respect for the human values. Only another fox like herself could appeal to her—I can do nothing. Nothing? If I had any decency, at least I'd clear out of here—and quickly—no matter what the consequences to myself!*

He could not go and knew it—for at the thought, something warm unfolded like a dark flower in his heart—the memory of a whisper in the depths of his soul, a face seen dreamlike in a mirror—

Wrenched between decency and desire he waited, hands clasped, each gripping the other as if crushing within them all disturbing thought and emotion. He stood numb—but not for long. For Wilde was coming down the stair.

His bags must have been packed and waiting. He carried one in each hand, and behind him was a servant with other luggage. He stopped, moistening his lips on sight of Yin Hu—moved as though to turn and run back upstairs. Then braced himself, threw out his chest, lifted his chin, asserting the human pride which Yin Hu seemed so much to despise. He continued downward.

When he was abreast of her she gestured, so quickly that Paul could not discern the actual movement, perceived only the blur of her writhing fingers like white flames flickering. Obedient to the unspoken command the psychiatrist set down his baggage.

Lascelles appeared in the background; stood waiting.

Yin Hu said: "You take your property with you, Wilde? You need none where you are going! You are departing the world of men."

His teeth were chattering, scissoring his words as he quavered: "You will not—kill me? You will—let me go?"

She beamed on him. She said: "Yes, I will let you go. I will not kill you. For it is your going which most I desire!"

Still his teeth chattered. She asked: "Is not this

leave-taking symbolic? You are no longer of use to my uncle and his wife—not even to yourself. You can do nothing for mankind. Your period of use is finished. Did I say—your use? Did you ever really serve your fellow-beings in any way? I doubt it—because what came from you was never directly from your heart. Behind your every thought and deed was ever the personal motive—the quest for advancement and money.”

He did not answer. She said: “You may defend yourself.”

He bit his lower lip to curtail its trembling. Finally, calmly, he said: “A man has to live!”

She nodded. “But hardly in the scale to which you aspired and to which you achieved.”

She swept closer toward him, as though from waist downward her body were liquid. She fluttered those flamelike fingers before his eyes. He did not blink. He gazed serenely ahead as though she had not approached.

She said: “You derided my illusions—you of all people, whose very existence was little more than illusion! A solipsism—for you have hidden ever from Life and the experiences constituting it—behind the screen of your training. You built yourself a wall of cynicism, and whatever intruded from without entered only at your pleasure, and then but through guarded portals. And as it came in, it was cloaked and painted by your theories until it was no longer part of Life but merely another aid toward the maintenance of the illusion of security you demanded. That is why I would not summon the fire-people myself—because you would have accepted them according to your distorted viewpoint and still remained happy in your haven of misapplied logic.”

She signalled to the servant with Wilde's luggage. He bowed, returned upstairs.

She continued: “It was my purpose to break your walls of cynicism. They were impregnable from without, but not from within. I gave to you but the subtlest of hints, the secret of the *huo-mo-kuli*—and you saw no danger from it, took it inside to mull over and examine, perhaps make use of it, if in no way it threatened your stability. Any other could have done the same to you—it was merely the old stratagem of the Trojan Horse.”

Paul thought: *The man doesn't hear her; she's saying this only for the benefit of Margot and Pandejo! Putting them on guard so that when she breaks through it, their despair will be more deadly.*

And his resentment against her strengthened.

She went on to Wilde: “By your own reasoning, the reasoning that built your mental fortress, you were bound to test the charm I gave you—so that you could flaunt its worthlessness to others, further convincing yourself of my limitations. But you were afraid! If the fire-demons actually appeared to you—they could be proven illusory. But would you believe your own proof? Not always! And there lay your downfall. For believing in the fire-demons and their blazing whips, you must deny your reason. And disbelieving them, you must deny your senses. You would not take either risk. And at once the disparity between mind and body tore your world of illusion apart, leaving you de-

fenceless. Now you are as a newborn infant, knowing neither whether you are awake at this moment or dreaming. A babe, accepting whatever appears . . .”

She sighed elaborately, and now Paul was certain that she spoke for the ears of Margot and Lascelles. “Ah, me—how I pity you! It is not quite your fault that you have come to such a pass. It is rather the fault of the system which made it necessary, your vaunted Western culture! Yet I have no compunction over your imminent death. In your present state you are worth nothing to anyone—not even yourself. Mad! And I have neither the time nor the inclination to tutor you in the rehabilitation of yourself.”

Again she sighed. “Poor man! You are like a dog beset with fleas.” She thrust her head snakily forward, sharp chin pointing fanglike. “A scientific dog nipped by fleas of doubt. Do you hear me?”

Tranquilly he asked: “I am—a dog?”

She clapped hands in delight. “You did not guess? But of course! I will prove it to you—for now you will grasp at any proof, will you not?”

He nodded, bewildered.

“You think you are a human being because you are standing upright, holding something in each forepaw—just as humans do. And you admire humans because you know nothing better—so you would be one of them. You have never run the deeps woods, sniffing, stalking, seeking a mate, baying at the distant lure of the rolling moon. Nor ripped the throat of your enemy, nor killed for pleasure—as is your instinct.”

Paul thought: *If Wilde were back to normalcy he could explain this. He'd say it was hypnotism, the use of suggestion on a mind so thoroughly demoralized that it is open to any command. Demoralized—how? By being pitted against itself—a master-stroke of psychology! What is Yin Hu, then—psychologist or witch?*

It did not decrease his mounting animosity toward the fox. For it led to the thought: *And last night's conversation between Yin Hu and Jean—it might have been hypnotism too—making sport of me with threats and insincere regrets.*

Yin Hu snapped her fingers, said sternly to Wilde: “Down—dog!”

He dropped the suitcases, fell on hands and knees. He was doglike indeed with that long torso, those short arms and legs, the yellow eyes limpid over the receding chin. But the fox was dissatisfied.

“Still too human,” she said. “You must forget that illusion of humanity—dog!”

Margot gasped and crushed her kerchief to her mouth, shrinking against the very windowpanes. Paul stepped backward to her. For Wilde had kicked off his shoes. He crouched on fingertips and stockinged toes, his knees against his ribs. He looked up at Yin Hu and whimpered.

“That is good,” she said. “And now, dog—sit up and beg!”

Ponderously he swayed to and fro, mustering strength for the effort. He pushed sharply on his fingers, catapulting head and shoulders upward. Stooping on his toes, he teetered pawing the air—fingers close together as though in mittens. In-



stead of sweating from the strain, he put out his tongue panting, flapping it, shaking drops of saliva—precisely like a dog on a hot day.

"Now speak!" Yin Hu commanded.

He barked shrilly, then dropped back on all fours. She bent and negligently patted his smooth dark hair, merry eyes sidewise on Margot and Lascelles. "Good dog," she soothed. "Pay your respects to Margot."

He quivered, turned his head, studied Margot in the alcove. She shrieked, losing her handkerchief as she sprang from the seat and flurried to Paul, taking shelter behind him, her long nails digging like thorns through his sleeves as, clutching him, she stood on tiptoe, peeping over his shoulders.

Wilde scrambled toward her, stopped a few feet from Paul; lowered his head and growled. He stiffened as though to leap—

"Ai, those fleas!" Yin Hu sorrowed. "You have forgotten them?"

Wilde ceased growling, lifted a foot and attempted to rake his ribs with it. Under other circumstances it could have been ludicrous. Here, deadly in earnest, it was terrifying.

A seam of Paul's sleeve ripped. He angled, scanned Margot. And now began hints of ghastly comedy which were to appear again and again—the humor of the unearthly. Her face was splotched crimson and green and white, her eyes so wide that their whites ringed the irises. Her clamping hands were claws. Yet her perfume was the mellow honey of roses. As incongruous as jewels on a corpse. And in its intimations, as sickening. He was to remember this observation a little later.

He said: "Yin Hu—for God's sake—this has gone far enough!"

"Not at all," she answered him blandly. "It has but begun!"

And spoke to Wilde: "You would drop fleas in the house, you naughty cur?" He cringed. "Outside with you!"

He scuttled to the door, leaped up, nails scratching its panels, paws rattling the knob. He fell back whimpering.

She flowed to the door, opened it, stepped from the way. He skittered out into the darkness. Icy cold rolled in from the entrance.

Margot screamed insanely, began to tug at Paul as if she were a dog herself and shaking a cat to its death. The seam at his shoulder gave way, his sleeve hanging by a thread. He wrested himself from her. She staggered about, hands blindly tearing at nothingness. Lascelles emerged from his place and caught her wrists with one hand; the other gripped her against him, palm over her mouth.

Lascelles said: "Quiet, Margot—we can do nothing!"

Tuke hurried in, paused helplessly on the threshold. None of the Oriental servants appeared, as though in advance they had been warned away. Lascelles said to the butler: "Nothing but fright, Tuke. Mrs. Meredith imagined—she saw a mouse."

Tuke mouthed incredulously. Paul sought Yin Hu. She was closing the door as innocently as

though she had just entered from a stroll. He raced to the portal, thrust the fox aside and looked out. She remained as he had placed her, smiling demurely.

Wilde was loping across the Avenue, still on hands and toes, toward the park's gateway. In the blue moonlight and streaming lights of traffic he looked indeed like a dog. And believing himself one, ran with astonishing speed.

Paul rushed outside, slipped on the steps and tumbled to the walk. He picked himself up and ran after Wilde, flinging a gesture of hasty apology as he ducked between swerving cars and their horns shrilled at him. If they stopped he neither knew nor cared. He passed through the gateway.

The air was like a crushing metal hand, it was so cold. This was perhaps the last bitterly frigid spell of the season, for it was late in April. Paul wished he had taken a coat, then was thankful that he had not—it would have weighed him down. And he needed all the swiftness he could summon, if he was to overtake the psychiatrist.

There was no wind except that which he stirred in his hurry. His eyes smarted from the caustic cold; he blinked them free of tears as he sped along. There were no people about—it was far too bitter for pleasuring in the park.

Here among the trees and snow it was like being within a moss-agate. Wilde had not kept to the pathway, was even now disappearing over the crest of a hillock. Paul scrambled after him, the powdery snow wedging into his shoes, biting his ankles like the closing jaws of a trap.

When he reached the knoll's summit, Wilde had vanished. He faltered shivering, so cold all over that his skin seemed stone. Which way? From far on his right arose a mournful ululation like the baying of a hound. He ran toward the right.

Something dark lay on the snow; he snatched it up as he sped. Wilde's coat, still warm. The baying arose again, but now to his left, from a grove of trees like black cobwebs. Again twisted cloth lay before him—Wilde's trousers this time. The man was stripping himself!

Clothes over arm, he raced onward. Deeper into the park the baying led him. The cold numbed his ears; he rubbed the circulation back into them.

Ever as he ran he found more of Wilde's clothing, but he no longer paused to retrieve it. Coat and trousers would keep the man sufficiently warm on the homeward journey—if he could catch him! He had been running Atalanta's race: she had stopped to pick up her competitor's golden apples and been defeated. He would no longer make the same mistake!

The chase led him through the Mall and the underpass beyond it—nearer and nearer the lagoon whereon in summer the boats coursed and the waterfowl flocked to feed.

He caught sight of Wilde atop a rocky promontory whose icy sides glittered silver. The man was stark bare, white against the frosty sky. He lifted his head and from his throat shuddered a prolonged wild cry inhuman as the banshee's lament, bestial as the howl of a lonely wolf. Whether fired by moonglow or burning from within, his yellow eyes blazed phosphorescently as

he caught sight of Paul. He scampered down the almost vertical face of the rock without slip or mishap directly toward Paul. And he was so much like a frenzied cur, so little like a man that instinctively Paul turned, dropped the clothing and ran from him.

Paul stopped, awaited the madman's attack. But Wilde had paused, was panting as he stared at the lagoon, his breath curling in the crystalline cold like lazy spirals of incense. Faint and distant came the muffled blast and muted blare of automobile horns. They and the world in which they belonged seemed infinitely remote.

The lakelet was not wholly sheathed by ice. The warmth of the afternoon had broken portions of its crust, puddled others. The water reflecting the dark sky was like blobs of ink on soiled paper. A second moon lay in the water, shivering as if it too felt the cold.

Wilde turned, wedged into a thicket of shrubbery, began snarling to thresh about, the twigs rustling and snapping as if he were engaged in combat with another beast. Paul crept toward him.

Something tripped him!

It was as though an arm had reached up from the snow and wrapped itself about his ankles, an arm with a taloned hand, for the claws needled into his clothing, further ripping it. He jerked into balance, looked at his feet. Despite the cold, Nature had been roguishly inclined, for here in the snow was a spray of climbing roses, leaves crisp and dark, unblighted by the cold!

Other sprays whipped up from the snow like worms pouring out of their holes. Quickly they twined around his legs, laddered up them. Ascending, they sent out buds of leaf and blossom, unfolding them, their fresh sweetness rising in milky steam.

He bruised his hands tearing at them. Swiftly one, then another, looped about his wrists, fettering them as with barbed wire. They swarmed up him like snakes, weaving over and under in basket fashion, imprisoning him in a prickling cage up to his shoulders—and all so rapidly that barely three breaths were taken from start to finish of the process! In the azure moonbeams the leaves were slate-green, the flowers mauve.

Almost as if sustaining Nature's flair for the comic, a cluster of buds opened just under his nose, ticking it, filling his nostrils with spicy fragrance. Leaves and flowers were warm as though under June sunlight . . . here in cold so intense that it streaked the air with the ragged crystal glimmers of hoarfrost!

He thought: *No wonder the fox didn't stop me when I went out—she meant to teach me never to interfere—*

And he thought: *If Wilde were himself, he'd say that my subconscious fear of Yin Hu is holding me back, assuaging my conscious desire to help the man by creating a picture of flowers miraculously springing from snow and binding me. Roses—based on remembrance of Margot's clawing hands of only a little while ago and her perfume.*

The rationalization did not free him.

The threshing ceased in the bushes. Wilde peered cannily out of them, his face streaked with blood and dirt, his mouth filled with dead leaves. He had been rooting for them in the snow.

Paul shouted the man's name, echoes ringing from one snowy bank to the other. Wilde did not hear him, or if he did, neither recognized the voice nor would be moved by it. He slunk from the shrubbery, naked white as the snow itself. He had cut one of his feet. He limped along with it lifted, hopping painfully straight for the lagoon.

Wilde pawed the ice, testing its strength, then hobbled out upon it. Paul heard it crackle and splinter, but it did not break. Wilde went farther out toward its center where the water was deep.

And now Paul realized the thought behind the action. Once he had seen a flea-ridden dog snatch up a mouthful of corn husks and swim out to deep water. The fleas had leaped from the wet to the dry husks until the dog was free of them. And it had dropped the last husk and swam away.

God, Wilde would catch his death of pneumonia, or drown! "Wilde!" Paul cried, straining against the needling grasp of the roses, forgetful of pain. "For God's sake, man—" The clustering buds pushed against his lips, gagging him.

Before Wilde could reach water, the ice broke. He tumbled into the blackness, throwing high a splash like largesse of diamonds. The ice tilted, glowing transparently in the moon's rays like clouded glass, then settled back almost perfectly in place, ripples welling darkly over the break for a moment or two. If Wilde rose to the surface, he found himself under ice.

The ripples quieted. The roses fell loosely at Paul's feet like a discarded garment. Burning from their scratches, he stepped from them. The cold struck him like a sledge. He had forgotten it was so tangible . . .

He walked to the lip of the lagoon, shaded his eyes from the moon and peered. There was no trace of the psychiatrist. He would have gone out over the ice, but it broke as he touched it—he was heavier than the little man had been.

Dully he went to where he had dropped Wilde's clothing, bent over, took it up. He looked back—

Only the snowy hills, the black lace of the trees, the lagoon with its ice and reflected sky . . . and in one spot, roses like tangled rags . . .

He stumbled toward the Meredith house, shifting the bundle of clothing from one arm to another as he rubbed his ears, his nose and his cheeks against the cold. He was too dazed to think of covering his head with the coat, utilising the trousers for a muff.

And as he walked, he wondered—
Who will be next?

XIV

HE thought: *If anyone passing the lagoon sees the roses—then Yin Hu is definitely a witch.*

Proof—such as it was—came late, for the newspapers were laggard in presenting it. Not until two days later did he discover the items. They were presented simply as filler material on unimportant pages.

The roses, Wilde's footprints and his own were variously explained as a freak of Nature coinciding with a faddist's passion for winter swimming, a surrealist joke and simply as "An occurrence which would have delighted that late collector of unusual notices, Mr. Charles Fort."

There was no hint of discovery of Wilde's body nor suspicion of foul play; absolutely nothing which could direct police investigation to Meredith's house.

And so, according to the testimony of others, Yin Hu was a witch. But Paul had the feeling that Wilde, were he alive, could explain the reality of the roses—and as for witchcraft, by this time he was willing to concede that anyone of highly specialized skill was a witch.

Meredith had suffered a nervous collapse and was in his bed during those two days. Margot made use of strong sedatives and for forty-eight hours slept away her worries. Lascelles drank steadily. Twice Paul attempted to leave the place and could not. He saw nothing of Yin Hu. He knew though that she was still in the house, for frequently he heard the plucked humming of the seven-stringed Ching.

He asked Lascelles about Li-kong. "Have you heard from him yet?"

Lascelles replied: "Charles' men are still searching for the son. When they get him—the information will be forthcoming. And"—he added fervently, belching—"I hope to hell it will be soon!"

Paul thought: *Appeal to Hell, Pandejo—I'm sure Heaven will never listen to you! And wondered: If they get the information—how can I let them use it against the fox?*

On the third day, as if she had charted her course with utmost care, but quite accidentally and entirely in the pursuit of her own pleasure—Margot stripped Yin Hu of all armor, delivering her to Meredith and Lascelles for the kill. And thus opened the way for the catastrophe which ultimately was to claim every one of them.

Paul saw her at breakfast, as on the first day they had met—deceptively young, compellingly beautiful. Her skin was tinged with softest rose, without wrinkles. In sleep she had washed away all marks of aging worry.

She was wearing a housecoat of some opaque and faintly glimmering material, its tone subdued violet, the color of smoke in the afterglow; so thin, so voluminous that at her slightest motion wreathing folds of it lifted and fluttered, like the play of evening shadows. Her pallidly blonde hair—gold seen in moonlight—was loosely coiled and pinned by combs edged with faded amethysts.

And again he sensed the remote, the classical—as though she were one of the daughters of Duolin who appear but once in the lifetime of every man. And as they left the breakfast hall he asked her: "What's happened to you, Margot? You're so lovely, of a sudden—"

She laughed archly, slipped a hand through the crook of his arm, leading him from the others. She asked: "And must something happen to me—before I am lovely?"

"I didn't mean it that way. Of course you're lovely—always have been." This was rather a two-edged compliment and he dulled one of its sides by adding: "But lately you've seemed so—well, tired."

She contemplated him sagaciously. "You mean—I've seemed old! For I am old, Paul. Old enough"—she laughed lightly as if lying—"to be your mother. And you've thought that, I know."

He denied it gallantly. She reproached: "Don't lie to me, sweet! I'm not in such awe of age as you. For after all—what is age?" Her hand tightened on his arm; they were at the entrance of the picture gallery by now. They looked in over a wide and long expanse of yellow parquet flooring, unbroken by furniture of any sort save for small sculptures on pedestals in the corners. Its drab walls, its bands of dim pictures in dull gold frames, were illuminated by a skylight.

She said: "This is my cue to remind you that the sweetest tunes come from old violins—and that snow on the roof means warmth in the house—and that time-mellowed wine is most intoxicating. Well, there you are—I've reminded you!"

She drew him into the gallery, pressing close to his side as though the doorway were too narrow for them to enter abreast. She was gazing expectantly up to him.

He would not answer her. He said instead: "I still don't understand. After the things that happened recently, you seemed crushed—"

"And was," she replied evenly. "But haven't I always told you I'm not like other women? We're doomed, we householders here—perhaps. At least, just now Yin Hu has the whip hand over us. Am I to mope and bewail the fact? What good could it possibly do? I might," she conceded thoughtfully, gazing at the rows of paintings, "I might mope and bewail to put on a show of proper repentance for my black, black sins—if I thought it would move Yin Hu to forgiveness. But her code admits of neither remorse nor pardon. She's too primitive, too direct for that. And"—she reached out, caught his other arm, drew him around to face her—"I like directness! I was never the one for hinting and obscure dramatics. Whatever I am thinking—I prefer the world to know it. And whatever I want—"

She did not require further words to finish the thought. She settled into a voluptuous pose which, with her bold gaze, conveyed her meaning.

He pulled gently from her, but her hands would not release him. She said, covering the space between them: "There's an old saying which exactly describes my sentiments—you're bound to have heard it. 'Eat, drink and be merry—for tomorrow . . .'"

Closer she came and closer, her soft warmth against him, her face but inches from his own, her perfume invading his nostrils, a breath from a hidden and lonely garden.

"Have we not eaten—drunk? Then let us be merry together! There need be no tomorrow. On—"

ly you and I together—now! These moments we will make into time of our own."

Her darkly blue eyes, so near his, were soft and mysterious as the dusk which steals imperceptibly on the commonplace world, blurring and blending all prosy detail into the magic beauty of the half-real and half-imagined. Her lips were out of range of his sight. He seemed to feel rather than see their passionate insistence, their promise of slumbrous satisfaction in emotional forgetfulness.

And because he felt them more than saw them, it was only natural that he strengthen the sensation by touching them with his own, blending with and claiming the drowsy delight they offered.

She slipped an arm around him, knotting them the more completely, the folds of her sleeves lifting languorously, caressing his cheek and floating reluctantly away as though they, too, knew and shared the enchantment.

He heard a crackling shriek as of ripping metal!

With a physical pang as though tearing himself from his own skin he wrested his lips from Margot's—saw Yin Hu in the doorway, cold and demonic as though face and body were a mask from which a devil raged! Something sparked from her to him, a flash of iridescent color like a jewel-scaled, gold-tipped arrow—a lash of rainbow light!

It flashed across his eyes with a steaming hiss, searing them, slid writhing swiftly around his throat like an infuriated serpent. Blind and strangling he lifted his hands, gasping for air, felt muscles turn slack on bones like melting wax.

From every angle, above, beside, below—behind him and in front—as though they had been awaiting this moment concealed and silent, shrieking whirlwinds pounced; sharp beaks of sound cutting him, shredding him, scattering the fragments as they rasped and ground—closer and ever closer to his heart! He felt himself totter, dropped wheeling it seemed for a thousand miles . . .

The buzz-saw screeching, the agony ceased abruptly as he felt himself sprawling, settling gradually and relaxed on the floor. Helpless he lay, hearing Margot's gasp from infinitely far above, the quick tattoo of her heels near his ears—as if she had grown colossal in stature—and, in diminuendo, the rustle of her robe as she turned and ran.

Soft hands smoothed his hair, patted his cheeks. He felt his head lifted and rested, he thought, on a warm pillow. The hands stroked his forehead, passed over his closed eyes.

Light wedged under his lids. Through his lashes he caught an unfocused glimpse of the fondling fingers. He knew those hands—long fingered and white, tapering like tall candle flames!

A measure of strength returned to him. He opened eyes, stared up into the face of—Yin Hu?

No, not quite . . . a face like hers, yet subtly diverse. Younger, softer, dream in eyes and contour . . . Occidentalized . . . a child's mouth just awakening to maidenhood . . .

The face of the girl in the hall, the girl of the mirrors . . .

The face of Jean Meredith!

And her voice, softly imploring him: "Beloved, awaken!" It was not Yin Hu's voice but that of the golden glow he had seen and heard in the magic darkness. And her touch was warmly human, containing no hint of Yin Hu's paresthetic coldness—and more pleasant than any he had heretofore known.

He noted that her hair was deeper in tone than that of the fox: brown with bronze glints. And her kiss was not the Lethean drug of Margot's mouth, but straightforward, hale and vivifying as the touch of sunlight emerging from thunderheads.

Before he could frame any question, she explained, naively serious: "Yin Hu was—raging! Her fury startled me from my sleep. She had seen something which frightened her lest I behold it also—and be moved to action were I at all astir. At the alarm I rushed into her eyes, for I knew it must be concerned with you. And I saw my aunt close with you—and you were yielding to her blandishments—and my love for you would not let me go. Then it was that Yin Hu, shaken from the seat of power and despairing, cast the destroying flame at you—even as she promised to slay you, rather than submit to me! But my coming was too swift, for I was borne on the tide of love, swifter than foxen intelligence—and as she hurled the flame, she was toppled into the abyss of slumber—and her aim was deflected."

She said, more womanly now: "Well for you it was thus deflected, Beloved—for had it touched your heart instead of eyes and throat—I would be mourning you this moment!"

He whispered: "Jean—Jean Meredith!"

She nodded soberly. "Yes, it is I. And at last I can speak of the love you brought me. But for how long . . . I do not know! For within me I feel the soul of Yin Hu struggling for possession of this, my body. I would not have it so, heart of my heart . . . I would stay here with you . . . forever . . ."

He was feeling almost himself again. He lifted his head from her lap, shifted his weight to an elbow, sat up. Together they remained on the floor, studying each other . . . seconds were as centuries . . .

Hesitantly she lifted a hand to him; quickly he caught it, pressed it to his heart. She crimsoned, dropped eyes in sudden shyness, would have snatched the hand away but that he refused to release it.

Slowly she looked to him. "Is this the love I heard in song and read in story? This sweetness of living at last—to which all else has been shadow? I love you—Paul Lascelles! And tell me"—her voice trembled—"do you love me?"

Love her? Yes, he loved her—knew that he had loved her since first he had seen her from the stair. No—even before then! He had loved her from Pierre Lascelles' crafty description of her and the sympathy which her plight had inspired. He loved her!

But now he remembered Lascelles' true plan—to capitalize on that love, use it against the fox!

Suddenly he was afraid. They loved—and they were together. But for what time? O God, what time?

He caught her against him, bent head and claimed her lips. For a heartbeat they clung close. Then she drew back her head, sent her eyes questing to his, grey as her own.

"There was more than love in that kiss," she said. "There was—terror! Be not afraid, beloved. I will fight Yin Hu from parting us."

"I'm not thinking of Yin Hu," he said. And looked around warily. Suppose Margot returned—or Meredith came—or Pandejo?

He scrambled erect, gave his hand and pulled her up. "Pandejo—that is my father—mustn't see you now! We'll have to hide some place immediately. For surely Margot has given alarm."

But where to go without risk of interception? He swept his gaze along the frieze of somber paintings, saw the door to the music room. "In there—we can lock ourselves away until I've thought of something."

Lightly she ran beside him, for his swift steps were long.

He closed the door behind them, turned its key; took her hands and drew her down on a bench. He told her of Lascelles' intentions. But she frowned in perplexity, and when he had finished, she said:

"You speak of him as of an enemy—and he is our friend!"

"Our friend!" His voice rose incredulously.

"Indeed our friend. Do you not realize that—whatever his motive—if he can slay the fox within me, nothing can part us?"

He shook his head dourly. "You don't know Pandejo. He's very . . . thorough. So much so, in fact, that rather than chance Yin Hu's returning from limbo . . . or her playing possum . . . he'll kill you too."

"Playing possum? Is it a game?"

"Feigning death."

"And if that is so—then my coming is ill-timed indeed! For had I lain sleeping until Yin Hu killed him and the others—then we would be in no danger. But"—she excused herself—"I did not know. Nor could I have slept when the call dragged me helplessly forth. Here I am, and here I must stay—for if I allow the fox to take seizin once more, then surely she will kill you."

She fingered his cheek, was interested in its hardness, touched her own in comparison. "And rather than have you die, I will give myself to this Pandejo, that he may end the fox though it mean my own death. For I love you," she whispered it, "more than all which has been in my lifetime—more than Yu Ch'ien and Fien-wi, the blue pagoda and the oval pool of peace—"

He said: "We've but one course—to run away. Run away where they can't find us. They'll search, never fear—thinking our departure a ruse and the fox's revenge delayed to add to its poignancy."

Lightly as moth flight her hand commanded silence; she held it like a wall between them. They listened, heard footsteps in the gallery and Lascelles' voice, worried: "Paul! Where are you?"

The doorknob rattled as it was tried. The portal itself shook under heavy blows. Did Lascelles mean to batter down the door? Paul called: "I'm in here—I'm all right! I just want to stay by myself for a while. I want to think!"

The hammering ceased. Lascelles shouted: "Open!" Then confidentially: "Margot said that the fox did something to you—"

"Yes," he called back, "she did. Then she went away. Now I'm trying to forget it." And crossly: "I said I was all right, didn't I?"

And Lascelles, with misgivings: "Well—if you want it so." And the sound of footfalls departing.

They waited, breaths sucked in. There was no further sound from without. He repeated: "We'll have to run away." She was meditatively silent, withdrawn from him. He said: "I haven't much money, but I think there's enough to pay our passage to China and Yunnan—Yu Ch'ien and your blue pagoda—"

Fretfully she struck one slim hand with the other. "No—it is nowhere so simple. There are other factors—and they make me afraid."

"Such as—?"

"For one thing, Fien-wi. She loves me I know. For she was nurse to me. And she is human as both you and I. But she swore an oath of allegiance to the foxes when she went to serve in their temple—an oath, the breaking of which means death, and worse than death. Eternities in the fox-hells, than which there is nothing more dreadful."

So he had guessed the nature of the brown woman's conflict. She was as yet in no inferno of fox-magic, but he was willing to wager that her present torment was as great. The human side of her loving and yearning to help Jean's humanity . . . her pledge to the foxes binding her to serve only Yin Hu! Now he understood her look of hate for him . . . for she had comprehended his attraction for Jean . . . attraction which spelt disaster for the fox to whom the brown woman was chained. How could she help but hate him?

Jean was saying: "Which side will conquer in Fien-wi, I do not know. Love for me—or for the fox? She cannot be trusted, certainly. Yet—should I leave this place, I cannot abandon her."

Accurately she interpreted his stern glance; shook her head miserably. "She loves me!"

"You said yourself—she can't be trusted!"

"No, she cannot. She has but to strike the silver gong in our chambers, the silver gong in the frame of jade with a fox-skull for its clapper. It is attuned to the vibration of Yin Hu's existence, its sound the same current as that of her life—and the fox will awaken."

He understood that. *Life, essentially, is vibration—and if the sound of an automobile horn can shatter crystal; if myriad radio receivers, miles apart, can tune into the same wave-length—why shouldn't the gong's note establish contact with the fox?*

Jean said: "Suppose the gong is beaten when I am off guard, all unwary! Yin Hu would thrust me aside and reign here"—she tapped her brow—"in my stead. Then—you would die. I cannot risk that. But to leave Fien-wi—!" Her eyes sparkled with quick tears.

He would have kissed her grief away, but gently she pushed him back from her. "Nor can we go to Yu Ch'ien—for is he not sworn to serve the foxes? And is not Yin Hu's vengeance incom-

plete? Is not the temple the very stronghold of the foxes?"

He soothed: "Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad as you think, there in the blue pagoda. They might send you to sleep while Yin Hu returned here—keeping me as hostage."

"You think as a man," she answered, "not as a fox. No, wherever we go—it will never be Yunnan. Nor can we stop anywhere for respite, since not only your father, my uncle and my aunt would hound us—but the foxes would be seeking us as well. All our lives, at our most fortunate, we will be pursued. And when finally discovered—as is inevitable—the penalty will be terrible."

He said eagerly: "I'm willing to risk it."

With an echo of his spirit she replied: "And I—if it is your wish. But something else must come for consideration. Something of this, something of my condition now, was foretold me at the Altar of the Five Moons, when on the eve of my departure for this land the foxes blessed me. Emotion would come to me as Jean Meredith, they said. But however it compelled, I must resist it. For never, they warned me, can I wholly conquer Yin Hu. Should I try, the fox would fight me—and while such combat took place, my body must be neglected and suffering, obeying neither the dictates of fox nor myself—hungering and thirsting. And if the strife be of long duration, the body must starve and die. And both the fox and myself without a habitation left us. The conflict ending in a draw."

She finished: "And if die my body did not—then at last the fox and I must come to agreement, both ruling as one, united into one personality, neither herself nor myself. A composite. Of this they warned me." She brooded on him: "And if so it should befall—my love would be tainted with the unearthly, and unclean! And Yin Hu's hate with my humanity! What of that?"

He said: "You've told me that your love is stronger than your desire for life. Well, so is mine. And as long as such love can continue, it is greater than Yin Hu and her magic. If magic it is! She cannot overshadow you."

She said: "Strong as is our love—I have heard that there are things stronger."

He answered his look of query. "No, not magic. Nor death. But for one thing—jealousy."

He laughed without restraint. "You need never be jealous for me!"

"Nor you for me. Yet—there is always that possibility. Should one of us doubt the other, even for an instant—the fox might awaken. No," she said, "I love you—and deeply I desire living with you, ministering to your wants, and—bearing your children! But there is only one thing we can do. And that is—say farewell. Now—while love's promise is unfulfilled, before we gain more with which we must part."

He caught her wrists, shook them. "Are you mad?"

"What else can we do? If you go, and I promise the fox to forget you—perhaps somewhere you will be safe."

"You could forget me?"

She pressed her cheek to his breast. "Never!"

Her hair was soft under his lips. He whispered: "Then—what are we to do?"

Her voice was muffled, shaking with sobs; "I do not know—oh, I do not know!"

He thought he heard a sound outside, the creak of a floor-board as somebody passed. It was not repeated. Perhaps he had imagined it.

But if Lascelles were spying! He shuddered. She felt it. Lifted her mouth to his. Again he tasted the clean sweetness of her kiss.

Then resolutely she drew from him, straightened up from the bench. She said: "I go now, lest they become suspicious and guess our situation. I will remain in my rooms until Fien-wi tells me that you have gone—thus none shall know that the fox is helpless. Then Fien-wi will strike the gong. The fox will answer. I will tell her all, and pray for her compassion. She has no mercy—still I will pray to her. And you—go while you may, and far, very far away. My love will be with you always. You need never feel alone."

He had arisen also. He reached to her, but she stepped away. "I can't leave you here! And call Yin Hu again and again—but if you really love me, your love will always send her back. And you'll be helpless. The people of this house will kill you. With Meredith's money they can always find means of avoiding a murder charge. And Meredith killed your father and mother—yes and innocent others—for less reason than he has to kill you now!"

She said, serene and inexorable: "Your life is worth more to me than mine."

"I won't go!"

She rushed forward, caught him, shook his shoulders. "But you must! If you love me, you must! Would you break my heart? If Yin Hu kills you—still will my body have shared the deed. And what more monstrous torture than for my body to slay the thing which is part of it?"

And now her kiss was salt with tears. "Beloved—do not defy me! Go—while you can!"

"No, Jean. No!"

She fingered the cloth of his coat carefully, intently, as though suddenly its color and weave had become very important to her. She was thinking . . . and she was feminine. When next she spoke, he did not understand the real thought behind her words. Masculinely, he took them at surface value.

"Then"—she sighed submissively—"we will go away as you wish. But first I must prepare. There is so much to be done—"

He was so deceived, so relieved by her abrupt capitulation that he became gruff. "No need at all for preparations. We'll go as we are. And right now!" He stretched out a hand for the door's key.

She struck the hand softly. "I owe much to Fien-wi. I will not desert her in this house of assassins. Provision must be made for her."

"The servants will come to her aid."

"The servants?" Her laugh was biting. "*Pei!* They are—merely illusions! There is no servant here except Tuke, the butler!"

He wondered: *Who makes the beds and cooks the food, and carries out all the chores?*

She explained: "You have not observed that time passes swiftly in this dwelling? It is because much of the day is spent by each one of you in

household duties, though you think yourselves otherwise employed."

"Even I?"

"Even you!"

"Once I had a valet. His name was Ling. He knew my tastes very well—"

"Naturally," she agreed, "since whatever you thought he did—you did, yourself!"

"But before I'd ever seen him, he'd laid out my clothes and run my bath."

"You imagined so. That was your picture—but no true one."

"But why did the fox send Ling when I was already performing his tasks?"

"She did not send him—I did. It was so that I could at times slip into his place when you were accustomed to his presence—you would have known nothing—" She colored, said staunchly: "It was because I loved you."

"I wouldn't want you for my servant! I'd rather serve you."

Again she raised a silencing hand. "Enough! The time slips past. Of this we—we can speak later. Now I go to Fien-wi, for here is another thing stronger than love—gratitude. I owe her much. Did I not tell you?"

He caught her, gripped her tightly as though her warmth against him could thaw his chill forebodings. "Jean—don't go! What if she strikes the gong?"

"I will hide the clapper, never fear. The sound will not be the same." Determinedly she stiffened. "Now—let me have done."

Her eyes turned from him. Her cheeks deepened in color. "Better if we are not seen leaving together. Go you first from this house. I will meet you in a few hours wherever you designate."

With an ingenuous lilt in her voice, a candor in her eyes that he did not suspect were consummate acting, she asked: "Is it not most wise?"

"I'd like it the other way around. You go first and I'll follow. Then I'll be sure there's no mis-carriage."

She nodded brightly. "Whatever you like, my love."

He named their rendezvous. "One last kiss . . . you're sure you won't get lost?"

Her mouth was merry, yes; but her eyes were somber. "Not I!"

He unlocked the door, peered out. The gallery was empty. He ventured forth, went to each doorway. None was about—not even one of the heretofore ubiquitous Orientals. Then he recalled that as long as Jean was mistress of the fox, there would be no Orientals.

"Coast's clear," he signalled. She came to him. "Slip upstairs—hurry! Don't let anyone see you—least of all, Pandejo."

She squeezed his hand and fled abruptly. He watched her until she was out of sight.

Then he turned, went the opposite way, waited a few moments and climbed the stair to the second floor. He posted himself in the hall where he could keep an eye on Jean's door. He would see her leaving, would guard her until she had gone.

He waited . . .

XV

MORE and more he looked down to his watch, his forebodings increasingly colder. Why did she take so long? Had something happened? There was no sound from her door. He paced the hall back and forth, one end to the other, cast anxious glances her way—as though the walls might have turned transparent on the second.

He heard someone coming, hurried to the landing. He bent and snapped the lace of a shoe, kneeled and fingered it. Any excuse to explain his presence here.

It was Lascelles. There was little real perturbation in his voice as he complained: "I cannot find any of the servants. They have vanished in a body, as if all planned to leave together and at once—or as if by magic!"

Then, "Ah, you have finished your sulking alone, behind the locked door. Tell me, son—what did Yin Hu do to you?"

Paul could not linger here talking to this man, when at any moment Jean might come out! He knotted the shoelace, straightened up. "Come to my room, and I'll tell you."

Nothing loth, Lascelles followed him up the stair, but turned on his way and speculatively eyed the fox-woman's door. Paul thought: *Perhaps mere curiosity—perhaps calculation. How much does Pandejo know?*

Eager to be rid of the man, eager to be back at his post, he invented a glib story. Yin Hu had frightened Margot away that she might be alone with Paul to give him a last warning—either he begone, or bear the consequences.

"And so you're going?" Lascelles asked, thoughtfully lighting a cigarette, watching his lighter's flame.

Paul said: "She gave me until sundown—the Hour of the Tortoise, she said."

Still Lascelles watched the flame, smiling wryly. "And my plans—you are not going to further them, as you promised?"

Paul had been thinking: *This has its amusing side. I'm creating the perfect alibi for leaving. Now he wondered: Or am I? That look on Pandejo's face isn't exactly reassuring. Oh, well—hell, he was always the expert at bluffing!*

He said arrogantly: "I was never interested in carrying out your plans—except where they were to my own advantage. Well, now it's to my advantage that I leave."

Sharply Lascelles clicked the lighter, extinguishing its flame; dropped it into a pocket. He took a long draw on his cigarette, eyes probing his son. He said: "I see! It is time for the—what you call, show-down. Very well! Yes—I knew. And knowing, have been able to turn all your gains to ends of my own." He laughed crisply. "It has its pleasant side, has it not? For me, at any rate."

"You mean—?"

"I mean what I have said. I am a better judge

of men than you have reckoned. And you—are you not my son? I know you well—well indeed. And I also know,” he added, with a sly droop of his eyelids, “that you love Yin Hu. And if you are leaving—it is not for long. You will be back. Even as I have tried to go and could not. Her magic will draw you—and if not her magic, then your love. I had considered this before ever approaching you.”

Paul touched his forehead. Wet with sweat. He thought: *God, for a few seconds, he had me worried! But he doesn't guess how things stand. Not if he thinks I love—the fox!*

It was best to make no denial lest Lascelles' devilishly quick mind leap to a more accurate conclusion. Nor yet to agree whole-heartedly. This called for acting! He said with apparent grudging: “Perhaps you're right, Pandejo. But at least I can try to go. Maybe—I do love her. But—”

“But you fear her, too.” Lascelles was gloating. “Then go.” Leisurely he inhaled smoke, said: “Let me help you pack—it will accentuate my pleasure when you return.”

“I won't return!”

“My lad, I told you—I know you well. All impulse. No intellect. You are not one to forswear love! You will be back!”

Paul fumed with impatience. Would Lascelles never leave him alone? And where was Jean—had she already gone? Casually he moved to a window, looked down to the street. Traffic was weaving over the slush . . . it must be warm outside . . . the cold snap ended . . .

Lascelles carefully ground out the spark of his cigarette, arose. He said: “*Au revoir*, then—for I will be waiting to welcome you back.”

Paul had no answer for him. Lascelles lingered a moment, shrugged; left the room. Barely had the door closed on him than Paul had tiptoed to it, set ear against it, listening. Lascelles was descending the steps.

He waited until the footfalls were faint, then opened the door a crack and looked out. Lascelles was gone. He crept to the railing, guardedly looked over it. The man had paused on the landing below, was eyeing Jean's portal. After a moment he shrugged, continued down to the first floor.

Again Paul waited, then slipped lightly to that landing. And more time passed. He went to Jean's door, lifted hand to rap, took it away. He went back to his spot. Hell—he'd waited more than an hour!

The door opened. Instead of Jean, Fien-wi emerged, hands tucked in full sleeves. She toddled toward him in the short quick steps of the Chinese women, face inscrutable. She bowed before him, removed something long and slim and yellow from her sleeve. A fan? No, a scroll. She presented it to him. As she straightened, their eyes met. In her was no longer—hate. Rather pity. And sorrow.

She turned, went back to Jean's door, shut it behind her.

He listened for sounds of approach. None came. He retreated halfway up the steps, prepared to flee at the slightest notice, and unrolled the scroll of yellow silk.

Beautifully lettered on it with a brush, as carefully composed as an abstract design, was the message: “My most loved one—I lied to you! Forgive me. I stay here to await Yin Hu. You cannot force entry to me, for by doing so you will inform the others that the fox is temporarily powerless, even as they wish. As I will pray to Yin Hu, so now I pray to you—leave while you can! And never forget that whatever may befall—I love you now and forever.”

Beneath it was her name and a curious Chinese glyph which might have been a butterfly. Equally it resembled curving lips.

He dropped hands to sides, crumpling the silk. The little fool! Why hadn't he guessed? And now what to do? He couldn't go away and leave her in Lascelles' net. He would have to stay and risk what lay in the future.

He took the scroll to his room. Sentimentally he searched it for sign of a teardrop's stain. None. He held a match to the silk; it bubbled and smoked into blistered cinders. He powdered them between thumb and forefinger, rinsed them down the drain. The stick he broke into tiny pieces, cast from the window. He wrote her a note imploring her to make use of common sense, skulked down to her door and slid it under the crack.

All day whenever possible he lurked on the stair, watching her door and waiting, hiding from every nearing sound. At dinner Lascelles expressed sarcastic surprise at seeing him and twitted him about changing his mind; he answered with lies.

Meredith and Margot were interested in what had occurred in the picture-gallery. He elaborated on the story he had given Lascelles. They accepted it. He saw the invitation repeated in Margot's eyes. It sickened him.

He no longer noticed the Chinese servants, but it was obvious that the others did. For when Margot left the dining room she complained of a chill, asked a non-entity, whom both Meredith and Lascelles seemed to see, for her shawl. Then slipped away from them and returned with it, handed it to herself—like a child playing with an imaginary friend. And while she was gone they talked as though she were present. When they referred to one of their statements made during her absence, it seemed that she could not remember. They repeated it.

Therein lay the explanation of the disappearing tea-service, that afternoon a week ago in the solarium. Well, if Lascelles did not know this—perhaps his plans, founded on half-truths, might fail.

Paul wondered who stoked the furnace, ordered supplies, cooked the meals. One of them, Jean had said. He wondered which one, and whether the workers moved in shifts.

Then tensed with terror. The servants were back! Good God—that meant that Yin Hu had taken possession of Jean!

No . . . perhaps it was Jean's doing . . . she had made use of the fox magic before . . .

Careful, Jean! If you make use of the fox's tricks—isn't there something of the fox in you? A link between her and yourself?

Somehow the night wore along. He did not go to bed for he knew he could never sleep. He

smoked a chain of cigarettes in his room, pacing and pacing the floor. A little after midnight he could stand it no longer. He crept out into the silent hallway, cat-footed noiselessly to Jean's door. Knocked so gently that he hardly heard the sound himself. There was no answer. He tried the door. The knob rattled loudly. He snatched fingers from it, heart pounding in his throat; cocked head from one side to the other, listening for any alarm.

He thought he heard a faint creak, but from what or where there was no telling.

When he rapped again the knob turned with but slight noise. The door swung a trifle ajar. In faint yellow light like the glow of one far, faint candle, he saw Fien-wi in silhouette. She puffed in a whisper something he could not understand, made quick signal for him to go.

He whispered back to her, his meaning clear in his tone if not his words: "Let me in, Fien-wi!"

She could not speak English, Lascelles had said—but she understood his idea. Vigorously she shook her head, signed again for him to depart, began to pull the door shut. He shot out a hand, pushed on the portal. Fien-wi hissed at him! He pushed harder. She set shoulder to the door, heaved against it—and she was strong! He wedged a toe into the crack, strained his whole body to the panels, heard Fien-wi grunt from the sudden stress.

There was a short, spirited struggle, a see-sawing back and forth. Then he was within, closing the door. Fien-wi pushed against him, her breast athwart his, a wall of woman-flesh barring him.

He would have stepped to one side and passed her. She read his intention, moved as he. They swayed this way and that. At last he took her by the elbows, lifted her from his path, set her down to one side and hurried ahead.

She whimpered in protest, but remained where he had placed her.

First he must find the gong of which Jean had spoken. Where was it? He sent his glance in brief search.

In one corner was a large image of Kwan Yin, Answerer of Prayers, Goddess of Compassion. Of Tang porcelain, tinted oyster-white, celadon green and vermilion, it stood high on a temporary mounting of intricate bronze cloud-forms. On this base glimmered red and gilt candles. Faint orange highlights touched the goddess' draperies and plump cheeks, gilded the mitre on her head; gleamed too from the crystal chandelier so out of keeping with the chamber's *Chinoiserie*.

The walls were saffron in color, the yellow almost ethereal, in the candlelight like sunset's glow. On them were mustard-tinged silk hangings of the Ming period, embroidered with countless repetitions of tiny blue bats and fantastic blood-colored chrysanthemums. The windows were masked with reed curtains, Cantonese fashion. The deep rug was like heavy black velvet vastly magnified, cinnabar dragons around its edges.

Beside the Kwan Yin there were squared chairs of carved black lacquer inlaid with nacre and polished turquoise. In the centre of the room, a pierced porcelain table lower than average—a disc, supported on the backs of four bull elephants,

from whose apertures tendrils of porcelain curled like solidified white smoke to uphold a dish of thick crystal in which blue iris bloomed.

Four-fold screens of garnet lacquer shielded the entrances to adjoining rooms, their panels translucent, mauve alabaster.

Last of all he saw the gong; it was to the right of an especially elaborate chair, consisted of an irregular jade frame like a chain of dancing foxes, mounted atop a block of silver. The gong itself was but a tiny argent circle.

From a hook on one side of the frame hung its striker, a wand of filigree silver tipped with a sculptured fox's skull.

As his eyes found it, Fien-wi comprehended his purpose. She scampered in her short little strides toward the gong. Swifter than she, he swept her aside and reached it first. He tore the clapper from its hook. With a faint moan she snatched at it, dragged on it.

They locked in a necessarily silent struggle, lurching from side to side over the rug, its long pile muffling their steps. At last he swung his hand high, too high for her to cling to it, almost dragged her from the floor. He twisted his wrist, breaking her grasp.

She fumbled at her girdle, whipped out a flashing, thin blade. He fended her stroke with a blow from the silver wand. The knife flew from her grasp, buried its point deep in the rug. He swooped down, caught it up, hurled it into the ceiling beyond her retrieving. It quivered there and hummed.

Defenseless now, she backed from him mumbling furiously. He strode to one of the screens, swung a panel, looked into the chamber beyond.

Jean's bedroom. A place all silken webs from floor to ceiling. The bed was low-lying, barely a few inches from the floor, was of lacquer tormented into the cloud-forms of the Kwan Yin's base. In light of a small jade lamp like a little moon he saw Jean sleeping fully dressed, as though wearily she had dropped down for but a moment and slumbered in spite of herself.

She was still safe, still Jean. His heart leapt from relief. Now, damn it. He'd take her away—

He had forgotten Fien-wi! In that little instant she had sprung on him, jerked his arm backward, bent it up from the elbow, pulling his wrist to the shoulder-blade. Caught off guard, he wrenched against the grip, only adding to the break-arm pain. Abruptly, spasmodically, his hand flew open. Fien-wi seized the silver clapper. She scurried to the gong.

He wheeled, raced after her, gained arm's length of her just as she struck the disc—

Too late to prevent her!

The gong shuddered, throwing forth a thin and treble scream—like a cry from the throat of Yin Hu! Laughing, her voice a husky flutter, Fien-wi bowed, presented Paul the clapper. She did not need it now!

Before he could take the wand, from the bedroom came a rustle, the stirring of cloth. Then a voice—the cold tinkle of silver bells. Yin Hu's voice: "You called me, Fien-wi? You called!" A silence, then a sigh like a wintry breeze. "Ah, yes—I remember!"

Fien-wi's was a torturer's grin. Over her shoulder he glimpsed the beaming visage of the goddess Kwan Yin. Supreme malice contrasted with supernal beneficence.

"Jean!" he cried. "Jean!"

Again the rustle of cloth—and now the fox was before him! Hair russet-red, a streak of white like a touch of moonglow, eyes phosphorescently green.

Fien-wi knelt to her.

Warmly she said to the brown woman: "You have served me well, Fien-wi!" And coldly to Paul: "You would call—Jean? She will come no longer to you. I will not bear recurrence of what took place this morning. I warned you—if she and her fatuous love threatened my rule—you would lie!"

Slowly, lips quirked crookedly, she murmured: "Almost I feel pity for you—were I able to feel pity! This humanity of Jean Meredith—it begins to taint my thought, worm itself into my personality. She loves? I have never felt her kind of love! Yet were I to know it, other human emotions might come with it."

Archly she suggested: "Perhaps pity—then I might spare you! Might spare even Meredith and his wife, and your father. Might forget all else, content to be only in your arms!"

He gasped: "Don't joke, Yin Hu. I know you're capricious, but—"

"Man, where is your humor? Why do you cling forever to your one illusion? If I am capricious, indulge with me in my caprice." She drifted nearer, lifted graceful fingers. "Come to me—love me!" she laughed frostily. "Love me—as today you loved Jean!"

He was cold—so cold with dread and unnameable loathing that he could not stir. Nor would he move, toward her.

Nearer she came and nearer. The candles before the Goddess Mercy wavered, burned dimly blue. Their ochreous shadows quivered on the wall—and for a breath they seemed not shadows at all, but gigantic slinking things—silhouettes of grotesque lithe beasts leaping in a dance of mockery!

Thickly he said: "God—Yin Hu—"

And now she was almost touching him, smiling with sharp white teeth, lips flamingly red as though roughed with scarlet light, green blaze of eyes never warming, only freezing him! Her hair had blurred into a rusty numbus.

Slowly she put her arms about him in embrace, lowly and virginally, a doubt puckering her forehead—as though never had she done this to any man before. Her hold was like a belt of ice. He began to shudder, teeth chattering behind tight lips.

Her eyes flared command! Groaning, he felt his arms lifting in answer to her will, enfolding her as though moved, however against his desire, by strings by some supernatural puppeteer! Her hold was so intense that it seemed to burn. The aching agony was so great that he could not breathe, lest in exhaling he sob.

There was nothing womanly about her. Holding her thus closely was as perverted as passionately clinging to a tree or stone.

Some weight was in back of his head, pushing, pressing it down so that his face must meet hers. Now indeed he sobbed as he fought against it with all remaining of control; at least turn his cheek to her. And could not!

As he was forced down to the hellfire of her mouth, he turned his eyes. At least he should not see her! He saw Fien-wi beyond, no longer smiling nor exalted. Blank-faced, aghast—doubt overwhelming all other expression . . .

Yin Hu's foxen malice, her inhuman caprice, carried her too far. For as they kissed and scarlet fires seemed to scorch both his mouth and the teeth behind it, seething through tissue into bone—the feel of his lips brought forth all humanity in her, all feminine emotion—woke Jean!

The fox might have given him, by mere gesture or casting of thought, torture unspeakable or actual death. Instead she had made use against him of a body not altogether hers—had wilfully summoned that body's rightful and sympathetic occupant, and defeated her purpose. Defeated—herself!

Human warmth cracked the unearthly cold. Ashen mouth became flesh again. The nimbus faded from bronze-gleaming hair. And grey eyes looked deeply into his own.

She whispered: "My love—my own love!"

Swiftly she broke from him, turned, jerked the silver stick from Fien-wi, triumphantly concealed it within her jacket. Then returned to him, gave him her lips again. He heard a muffled wail, lifted his eyes, saw Fien-wi weeping!

Jean spoke to the brown woman in the unknown dialect, questioning. Fien-wi moaned an answer, rocking from side to side.

Jean drew him to one of the chairs, knelt by him as he sat. Fien-wi followed them, flung herself at their feet, lay full length and face downward, hands folded over her head; she beat them miserably on the floor. Jean reached to her, patted her soothingly. The brown woman clambered up, pawed tears from her eyes, bowed again and again then scrambled from the room. Soon from behind the screen came the mournful chirp of her flute. She serenaded them.

Jean said: "Poor woman—what else could she have done? There was her pledge to safeguard Yin Hu—and I was sleeping, only a woman, easily taken. She was afraid for my sake and would have sacrificed you to protect me. She was both fulfilling her vow and defending my person. I cannot blame her."

"Sometimes," he said, "I find you a little too human." And gripped her hands. He said: "Twice you've beaten Yin Hu. Why not a third and fourth—a thousandth time? Darling, run away with me now! Wherever we are, here or elsewhere, the risks tally the same."

"Do not speak of it! Only hold me. Hold me close!" Sleepily she murmured: "And tell me you love me!"

He told her that, and more. At last he lifted her unresisting and carried her to her bed. *When she's really asleep, I'll carry her out of the house and away!* She clung to his fingers, interlaced hers with them, pulled him beside her. For a while he rested beside her, chafing yet content. Drowsily

she nestled closer . . . he forgot all danger . . . knew nothing but her . . .

And on and along from her place behind the screen, Fien-wi's flute warbled its melodies. Songs from the ancient, immemorial past, played for and sung by who could tell how many generations of lovers such as these—lovers who with their passions were withered away as though never they had been!

Songs more real and enduring than their makers, not mortal as human flesh but immortal as human emotion. Melodies for all men of all times, therefore without time as they deepened a timeless mood. And if hours winged past the pair, they did not know. His head drooped, settled on Jean's breast. Together they slumbered.

The moon lamp dimmed with the advent of grey daylight. The flute was silent. Huddled behind the screen, weight slumped against its panels, Fien-wi slept, head thrown back, mouth agape, pierced pipe loose in her lax fingers.

The grey light yellowed with dawning. Paul awoke, Jean's hand in his. It stirred as if in unconscious protest as carefully he slid his fingers from its grasp. He sat up. The silver wand had fallen from her jacket, lay beside her. He tucked it in the breast pocket of his coat . . . it would never see use again . . .

He stood beside the bed, looking down on Jean. The graceful sweep of her body, the curve of her cheek, softly shadowed by the long lashes . . . the lips no longer a child's but a woman's . . . warm with a woman's passion . . .

He tiptoed to the gong, smiling down on Fien-wi as he passed her. He plucked the silver disc—it was very thin—from its jade standard and bent it, folded it, put it in another pocket.

The candles had guttered out before Kwan Yin. He took a chair, sat studying the goddess, formulating and discarding plans for escape. What if she awakened as he carried her outside? He could drug her, perhaps . . . would Fien-wi cause trouble by dissenting? Her repentance had seemed sincere enough . . .

While he was mulling over these thoughts, there came a sound from the door opening on the hall. It swayed ajar. After the struggle last night when he had effected entrance, neither the brown woman nor himself had thought of locking it.

As he started from the chair, uncertain whether to greet the visitor and disclose Yin Hu's vanquishment, or conceal himself and trust that Fien-wi had wit and courage enough to act a lie—

Lascelles walked in.

XVI

LASCELLES' entrance did not smack of incursion. He sauntered in as though invited, one hand in the pocket of his burgundy-silk dressing robe.

His thin hair was slightly tousled, his eyes a trifle raw from his nightlong vigil, but he car-

ried himself with the arrogant familiarity of a favored courtier in the presence of his liege. Only his eyes expressed trespass—they flicked cuttingly about the room, quickly photographing its every detail; came to rest at last on Paul. He said dryly:

"Good morning—son!" Paul realized that the title had always been mockery, insult against what it should have meant. He was speechless with rage and fear—rage at Lascelles' brazen intrusion, fear of an attack on Jean, now so helpless.

Lascelles said: "I saw you enter last night—with enviable courage you came in, considering Yin Hu's treatment of you, as reported earlier in the day. Naturally I could not turn away—I was curious to see in what state you would emerge. But you did not emerge! So I became worried about you, my son. So worried in fact that I deemed it requisite to rescue you! And thus ventured inside. So worried too, that I took the precaution of bringing—this!"

He took from his pocket a .38 automatic, displayed it by casually waving it. "But now—I see I need not have been so concerned for your safety. Obviously you have made a successful conquest and are to be congratulated for it. And praised—for your considerate service to me."

He grinned. "What if as yet we have no hostage against Li-kong? I have no need of Li-kong and his counter-magic. Not now!"

Paul's hands curved into claws. Rage mastering him, he growled, started forward. Lascelles fell back a step, swiftly raised the gun.

"Hold where you are! I like you better there!"

Paul recognized the spark in those eyes, had glimpsed it on previous occasions. The cold flash of murder. Lascelles was his father—even so, he was perfectly capable of shooting his son. Not to kill, perhaps—only wound and lame, preventing him from defense of Jean. He paused, temporizing.

Lascelles said blandly: "You could not have spent a whole night with the fox unless she were interested in the experiment of—playing human. And she would not do that! Hence you were with her other self. A self most innocent, defying convention in keeping you here, a self which loves you very greatly. I incline toward the latter view—she loves you and the fox is completely subordinated by her love. As I planned—she is in no condition to protect herself. And now while Yin Hu is on leave, I will make her exile a finality."

He gestured with the gun, emphasizing the threat. Again Paul moved forward. The automatic swerved his way.

Lascelles said between his teeth: "Did I not tell you to hold still? You think I would have compunction because you are of my blood? You are not! You have disowned me—else why call me Pandejo, Butcher—instead of father? So, since there is between us no family tie—"

Paul's second step had brought him close to the porcelain table. He said: "The girl's helpless, yes. So you're safe. No need to kill her! Let me have her—I'll take her away."

Lascelles shook his head. "I take no risks. The fox sleeps within her as within a fortress. Well,

the fortress must be demolished, the fox within it. So it shall be!"

Paul's mouth opened, clamped shut. Should he shout to the brown woman and the girl, wake them and at least warn them? No, reason told him. If Jean appeared at her doorway, Lascelles would shoot to kill. If the man had to go to fetch her—perhaps something could prevent him on his way.

Lascelles read the thought in that broken motion. He said: "You will not call her? Then I will!"

As he shouted, his attention was shifted for an instant to the screened doorways. Paul swept an arm over the tabletop, ducked aside as crystal basin and its flowers crashed on the floor. Lascelles instinctively fired toward the sound. Even so, the shot went wild of his aim, for Paul had dived at him, bearing him backward, toppling him. The gun coughed again, a third time, as they tumbled about the floor.

Paul pressed thumbnail deep into the underside of Lascelles' wrist, paralysing the nerves. He shook the hand, flinging the gun from it. Lascelles' hard life had kept him limber. Lithe as a snake, however Paul pinned him down, he slid agilely free.

Over they rolled and over—and now there were shrill cries from Fien-wi, soft ones from Jean. Both girl and serving-woman were awake and watching, huddled together.

Lascelles' quick fingers dug deep in Paul's hair, twisted it, forced his head around in breakneck angle. Paul changed grip. Lascelles swarmed atop him, released hold on his hair, shifted hands to his throat, strangling him. Uselessly Paul tore at him, then swept out hands in desperate search of something on which to fasten grip, lever himself to freedom. The dagger in the ceiling gleamed raillery.

Paul struck the smooth coldness of the porcelain table, wet his palm in the water spilled from the crystal bowl. He touched the scattered iris, caught them up and rammed them against Lascelles' face, into eyes and mouth. Spluttering, Lascelles whipped away his own hands, clawed the crushed mass from his face. Immediately Paul had him falling backward; writhed, pinned his shoulders to the carpet.

Jean rushed to them, caught up a fragment of the broken bowl, kneeled close to Paul, menacing Lascelles. She snatched at another pointed shard, held it to Paul. He shook his head.

"Get the gun!" he said.

She dropped the improvised knife, stood up, eyes prowling the floor. Now there were other cries from the hall entrance. Meredith stood there in tent-like folds of pajamas become too large for him. Margot was slightly behind him, hardly clothed in the sheerest of nightgowns.

Meredith saw the gun first. He scrambled to it, snatched it before Jean could intervene. As he levelled it, aiming for Paul, Jean sprang before him to shield her lover.

But Margot had her own interests at heart and struck her husband's arm, deviating the shot; it plowed a neat furrow in the carpet not far from Lascelles' head, goading him to a supreme effort. He wrested aside, crockled, threw Paul down.

Jean and Meredith were struggling for possession of the gun, Margot joining them, helping neither—determined on having the weapon for her own. Fien-wi raced into the fray. Lascelles lifted Paul by throat and belt, hurled him backward. His head grazed the table's edge—stunned, blinded by blinking lights, Paul fell slack. At once Jean abandoned Meredith, ran to Paul's side. And Lascelles, panting, flew to Meredith, pushing Margot and the brown woman aside, tore away the gun.

Paul's head cleared. He gathered himself for a leap—

Too late! Lascelles was standing over him, gun ready. Jean interposed herself between them. If Lascelles killed Paul—he would kill her first. Just what the man wanted!

She was willing to sacrifice herself for Paul—therein lay the seed of what was soon to germinate, sprout to evil flower.

A moment they remained thus. And in that moment Meredith snapped: "Damn you, Margot—why didn't you let me get him?"

"But you can't murder them outright! Think of the consequences!"

"Damn the consequences!"

And Margot, heatedly: "A lot of good your money would do me—if I were jailed as your accessory!"

If he caught her selfish motive, he did not take offense. He was thinking only of himself: "I'd have found some way out, if it came to the police."

Meanwhile, Lascelles was gloating: "Got you! Got you both! And just as I want you."

Paul was thinking: *Damn it—I broke the gong! Well, even if I hadn't, there'd be no chance to strike it now! Pandejo's got us! And grieving: If I could conjure up the fox, I'd do it, even if she killed me. Anything rather than let Pandejo get off scot-free!*

He gripped Jean to force her behind him—it was all he could do.

Lascelles drew back. "All right, you two—get up! Go over there." He jerked his head, pointing with it to the wall beside the statue of Kwan Yin.

As Paul struggled erect, Margot advanced a step, was pulled back by Meredith. She cried: "You're not going to shoot them? Pierre—you can't!"

Meredith growled: "Shut up, Margot!"

Lascelles, gaze bound to the retreating pair, asked: "Fien-wi! Where's the serving-woman? Come over here!" He remembered that she did not speak English, said to Jean: "Call her!"

There was nothing to gain by refusing his request. If necessary he could shoot the two first, then turn and fire on Fien-wi. And his demand offered Jean unexpected opportunity. It would take several seconds for the brown woman to approach. She called out sharp syllables, then whispered quickly to Paul: "Beloved—I make this sacrifice because I love you. I love you so—"

Fien-wi had started toward them, scurrying in her exaggeratedly tiny steps. As Paul held Jean, looking at her for what was indubitably to be the last time, he felt her shudder, saw that her eyes were vacant.

he was murmuring: "I do not know what will be the outcome—since now I am strong as the —" She might have thought she was telling more, for her lips still moved though he did hear nothing. Fien-wi was almost to them. Margot shrieked: "Pierre—don't! Don't kill him!" She flung hands to her eyes, turned. "I'm going to be any party to this!"

When the unforeseen happened. As though no longer aware of any menace, Jean tugged on it, drew him away from the wall; caught Fien-wi's hand, pulled her along. Yet Lascelles, Margot and Margot stared at the empty spot as though still the three were there!

Paul whispered: "Jean! What are you doing?" He turned her face to him, whispered: "Hush!" His hand was suddenly cold in his—a familiar, chilling cold! And her eyes—their grey was tinged with deepening green. There were streaks of russet in her hair!

But she was not Yin Hu. No, nor yet Jean. He did not understand. Jean would not have saved the fox to their rescue—because it meant death. Had she granted Yin Hu only partial mercy, confident that she could force the fox back to banishment? If so—once they were free of the accursed house, they would be safe from Yin

Myristified, he would have puzzled further on the enigma had not Lascelles, gazing at the blank ceiling before him, snapped: "Very well—you are three together! And now, my son—though the women die, you need not. Promise me your silence for this affair. Promise, too, never to seek vengeance—"

Margot stretched out her white arms, wailed: "Paul—agree to anything! Don't go from me with me!" Her cello notes scratched to a scream: "I give you anything—anything!"

Momentarily Meredith's gaze sojourned on her. Her mouth twitched. So—money was the only true bond between them?

Her skin was snowy as the satin of her shift, her hair but palely golden. She was like some statue from decadent Greece—splendidly full-mooned, an impassioned Selene calling Endymion. He thought: *Like a statue . . . calling to another . . .*

Lascelles rasped to the vacant area: "Answer me, man! I will not wait forever!" Jean—or Yin Hu, whoever she was—lifted a palm to Paul's mouth lest he speak.

Lascelles grinned tautly. "I thought so—you sentimental pup! Know then that it is the way I want it!"

Four of the automatic's nine shots had been expended. He sent three more into the wall, baring teeth as the gun cracked, jumping in his hand. His eyes, Meredith's and Margot's lowered as though following the fall of bodies. From Margot throbbed a despairing moan. Purely from pity rather than love she sought Meredith's face by clinging to him, her head dropping on his shoulder. And as unthinkingly, as habitually, he stroked her hair.

Lascelles strode over to where the figmentary corpses lay, fired two last mercy shots—Paul wondered into which imagined heads.

The fox-woman called lightly, with mock sadness: "But Lascelles! I, the fox, still live!"

He jumped, cheek muscles working. His head jerked toward her voice, turned elsewhere. He had not seen her! Paul wondered: *Are we invisible?*

The voice came from behind Lascelles, from the goddess Kwan Yin! "I am here, Lascelles! Over here!" Like his father, like the Merediths, Paul looked to the spot.

His hand caught the woman's wrist. Its solidity reassured him. Yes, she was still beside him—but there before the porcelain image stood a phantom twin to her, an illusionary duplicate. Lascelles did not see it as spectral. Nor Meredith. Nor his wife. Lascelles cowered backward.

Paul's attention wavered between wraith and real woman. The phantom was truly Yin Hu—hair of rusty red flame, slanting green eyes like scintillant emeralds, body lithe and sinuous as an animal's—

While the woman beside him was neither Yin Hu nor Jean but rather a blend of the two!

Lascelles gaped at where he had sent the shots; no longer he seemed to see bodies there. Then he threw the gun! It passed through the phantom, clanked against Kwan Yin's cheek, glanced off and fell with little sound on the rug.

The illusory Yin Hu laughed somberly—her silver bells tolling from a tomb. Idly she moved from the effigy of the goddess, paused before one of the reed-curtained windows.

She said mournfully: "You should not have done that. You have offended the Goddess of Mercy! Now she will not intercede for you—in what is to come!"

If Paul had been whisked from some other scene and set down in the chamber at this instant, he would never have known that this cringing man was his father—so much he had altered. Lean, wiry, face a white lump of shock, he was an attenuated grotesque; a spidery scarecrow.

The wraith said: "As it has come, Lascelles—the moment of your death!"

The Frenchman did not open his mouth, yet from his throat tore a muted shriek! As if snapped from springs, he leaped for Yin Hu, his intention plain—if die he must, then she would die with him, borne by his weight through the glass to the street below!

He passed through her as through a pillar of colored vapour. The reed curtain snapping, dropping as glass shattered. Then—the impossible! He did not tumble outside—nor the reed matting, nor the flying splinters of glass. Around them all the air crystallised, held them motionless as though they were encased in thick gelatin. Like a fly in amber, Lascelles hung in mid-fall, and with him the crumpled curtain, the broken glass!

Before him, unruffled, the illusion of Yin Hu stood as though before some interesting Museum exhibit. She inspected him casually. "Lascelles, can you hear me?"

She stamped a foot. "Answer!"

From head to feet a shiver shook him. Through tight lips he mumbled: "I hear you."

"Since Kwan Yin has not interceded for you—I will do so." Her laughter pealed wildly and long. Ghouls had entered the tomb from which the sil-

ver bells had knelled, had set them jangling.

She said to Meredith, to Margot: "He is your friend. At least, your employee. Will you let him die? Have you no plea to make for him?"

They did not speak, were as frozen as Lascelles.

She said: "Let us test your feelings toward him. I will spare him if one of you will take his place."

Still no response. Sharply now, green fires dimmed by her frown, she cried: "You do not grasp my meaning! This is an easy death—merely a fall. Easier far than what is in store for you! One of you, be wise—accept my offer. Take his place!"

For all their reaction, they might not have been present.

Returning to Lascelles, she said: "Yes—an easy death. Too easy for you . . . I would reserve you for something more . . . ah, much more . . . difficult . . ."

Paul was unnerved. *Damn it—this is what I've been waiting for. But now I can't let her go through with it! He deserves it, yes—but he's my father!*

The phantasm said to him: "You are not included in the offer and may not speak." And to Lascelles: "Very well—abandoned as you abandoned others—drop to your death!"

She vanished like a snuffed flame, and with her vanished the reed curtain, the scraps of glass. Lascelles had plunged through only an imaginary window—had leaped at the vision of one. For a few seconds he hung in air over the dragon-bordered rug; dropped on it, breath beaten from him in a quick, loud cough as he sprawled, seemingly flung from a vast height, and lay still.

Margot whimpered. Meredith went to Lascelles, bent, gingerly touched his wrists and throat. His voice cracked as he looked up, muttered: "There's no pulse."

"Dead!" Margot sniffled. "Dead!"

Paul, Fien-wi and the fox-woman were no longer hidden from sight. Margot saw them, blanched and gaped. One hand flew in surprise and fear to her sagging mouth. The other, moved by passion stronger than shock and dread, lifted gladly and hungrily toward Paul. Meredith was also aware of them. He staggered upright, stood rocking, muscles twitching violently and horribly under the pendent skin of his face.

The fox-woman, eyes downcast, spoke pensively as if thinking aloud: "Now it is well that I did—what I have done! I who am no longer human nor fox, but both—there is fulfillment in me, and I am glad! The cold of the outsider balanced by the warmth of the human—complete accord between the two at last! Henceforth we will be as one—no more struggle after ownership of this body, but peace—peace—"

She smiled, with only the echo of the silver chimes in her tone: "Stronger than the fox was Jean's love . . . yet willingly Jean thought to sacrifice all hope of future happiness, of love, of life itself, when she agreed to the terms of Yin Hu . . . that both should rule in harmony."

She sighed: "Now I need fear no more. There is no longer contention within me! Jean I am not, nor Yin Hu. I am—the fusion of the two. A compound of them, a stranger. I am the fox who loves

as humans love—the girl who hates as foxes hate! *Hu-li-ching!* A link between mortal and immortal."

She contemplated Paul, turned from him to Fien-wi, to Margot and Meredith. "All is changed! This man—I both love and hate him now. Ah, sweetly I will torture him with cruel caresses which wound and never satisfy—yet whose lure will drag him ever back for more. And this brown woman—nothing but a foolish, doting servant."

Of Margot: "Her I still hate—but with fiercer flame. She would claim this man of mine for her own!"

Of Meredith: "My own flesh and blood whom I will slay with pleasant pain. Oh, it is well and very well!"

Fox and woman . . . inextricably mingled . . . each partaking of the other's ambition and power . . . love turned to sadism . . . capricious hate lowered to utter refinement of deviltry. For what can any of us hope from such as this? God help us all now!

Perhaps it was not too late. Perhaps the change was but momentary! He shook her, crying: "Jean! Come back!"

The grey-green, slightly oblique eyes took on a malicious glint—yet mixed with malice was an amorous softness. She whispered: "Together we answer—Jean and Yin Hu."

And yearned toward him, lifting lips to his. Sweet of love and salt of evil, her kiss—this stranger's kiss—was like an evil memory intruding on a happy moment. The pressure of her embrace was demanding while indifferent—the embrace of an automaton!

He could return neither kiss nor embrace. He could feel nothing except mounting repulsion and rancor. As though his beloved had died and this woman were a copy sent to simulate and mock and desecrate his beloved.

He had heard of zombies—the Haitian fiction of cadavers restored to all semblance of life, yet without souls. What was this fox-woman if not one of those zombies? Loving her was inconceivable as loving a corpse from a grave!

A portion of both mind and heart seemed to shrivel within him—as if part of his world had crumbled away, blemishing the fairness of all the rest with its gaping fissures.

Puzzled, she slipped from him, eyes askance. "What, you no longer love as before? Yet you shall love me!"

Across the cheek she struck him, the stinging slap as insensate as the lash of a bent branch flying. Then she smiled—but he preferred the blow to that unfeeling smile. She said: "Ah, well—you will love me later on. You will love me after I have disposed of these two and we are unencumbered by concern for them. Together we will go about the world—men will be my slaves, fettered by my illusions. Whatever you desire in your heart of hearts, whatever you are inhibited from grasping—it shall be yours unasked. And then surely you must love me—"

She laughed. "The two—and alas that they are but two! Would that I had been as I am now when there were more than two! Their passing must recompense me for what I would have done to the others—how they will cry to me for pity! I know what is pity, but they shall not have it. I must take time to deliberate on their punishment

—"Sharp-pointed black shadows smoked over her face as she speculated.

He saw that on Fien-wi's countenance was no more conflict. No struggle between love for Jean, promise to the fox. There was a new expression—bewilderment, and the dawning hint of enmity.

The fox-woman spoke to her. Fien-wi bowed uncertainly and scuttled behind the screens. The fox-woman said to Paul: "Go from me now. And think never to leave me!" He hesitated, looking from the Merediths to the body of Lascelles.

"That?" she asked. "Uncle mine—send for a physician. And if you will, for the police! They will certify that he died of natural causes—and me they cannot intimidate nor take. Do not think to set them against me—I will not have them involved. If they search, they shall not find me. And all three of you—await my bidding!"

Airily she waved at them as if sweeping them all outside.

"Now—go!"

XVII

THE succeeding hours were but short intermission on horrors. Meredith summoned his doctor, who pronounced Lascelles' death the result of cardiac thrombosis; he prescribed sedatives for Meredith and his wife, had the body removed by morticians.

Paul had gone to his room, lay restless on his bed, sick with despair. His head ached from the flashing maelstrom of sounds and images rioting within it. Tossing, burying his face under pillows as though to shut out the phantasmal tumult, he would glimpse Jean's face, hear her voice, shiver with cold delight at the memory of her touch. Then all would be caught in the tempest, torn away and replaced by the ghastly parody of the newcomer. He moaned, beat the pillows with his fists, bit and tore the cloth until slowly the ache died away, leaving him exhausted; until sanity returned.

He bathed, changed into fresh clothing, lit a cigarette and sat in the chair by the window, gazing out through the glass. It was oddly cold in the room. Outside, the sun was shining. By craning, he could discern patches of sere grass in the park, exposed by the thaw.

He thought: *Spring has come late . . . what do I care? What do I care now about anything? Jean's gone—the sooner I'm dead, the better!*

He had given up belief in an afterworld; now he revived it. *If there are such things as fox-spirits, why not life after death? And maybe Jean will be waiting there for me!*

That was how he thought of her—as one already dead. An ingredient in this bewildering new personality, she was no more her own self than is an ingredient in a finished product of cookery; a brick in a building.

If love could have brought her back to him—it would have done so already. His appeal had been useless. And Jean was beyond appeal. *Dead*, he thought again. *I wish I were dead along with her!*

Whatever happened now, he did not care.

He sank into a tranced state. The sun lowered, rusting the city's towers, edging the park's trees with scarlet. The dry grass turned the color of old blood. The snow gleamed like rose quartz, turned lilac, then blue. Buildings huddled closer together in the purple twilight, as if life came to them at nightfall and they gathered for gossip. They flowed into each other like running pigment. Unconsciously Paul left his chair to snap on the light; returned to it, to his brooding.

Occasionally shame gnawed him, guilt nibbled him—regrets over Lascelles. Not so much for deeds against the man as for the intentions he had harbored against him. Well—remorse was pointless now.

Shaking with bitterness he returned to thoughts of Jean, striving to conjure her back to him, create illusions all his own—the solace of her embrace, the benison of her kiss. Only she could steady him through a crisis like this—she who was cause of the crisis! He groaned at the saturnine humor of it.

On the heels of that groan there was a timid tapping at his door, so faint as to be barely audible. Before he could call out to be left alone, Meredith poised birdlike on the threshold, furtively peeping back into the corridor. As furtively he scuttled inside, quickly and noiselessly closed the door.

He stopped, regarding Paul. He raised a hand to his eyes, lifted the curtaining flesh as though better to study the man; dropped the hand and came forward. He did not sit down; stood bent-kneed and nervous before Paul, twitching at imagined sounds, peering about as though certain of pursuit. He said querulously: "Put something on you—or you'll catch pneumonia."

Paul said irritably: "Thanks, I've enough on me as it is." He growled: "Get out of here and leave me to myself. I'm in no mood for talking! Not now." He hoped the man would not obey the command. He needed someone, anyone, to stay beside him, just then. From his longing for Jean he felt the madness returning on him.

Meredith whispered: "I know—and I'm sorry for you." He gestured quick apology to the flare of temper flushing Paul's cheeks, added: "I know you don't want pity. I haven't come to give it to you. But I—but we—have got to do something. You heard what—what the fox-woman said. You're one of us now. What's gone before has been changed. She's not one thing or the other. She'll kill you, too!"

Paul said: "That's fine. That's what I'm hoping for."

Meredith gaped. "You're out of your mind!"

"I suppose so." Suddenly he liked the old man—even if Meredith had wanted his death not so long ago. It was good to be distracted from remembrances. None of this was real. The only reality he had ever known, Jean had taken with her. He couldn't hate Meredith—not now.

He wondered how his cigarettes came to be on his lap when he had tucked them into a pocket. He offered the pack: "Have one?"

Meredith accepted it but did not raise it to his mouth. He rolled it about in his fingers while Paul hunted for his lighter. He'd put it into a pocket, too—but here it was on his lap.

The cigarette snapped in Meredith's hold. He

dropped it; found a chair and dragged it near Paul's. He sat down as though on a cactus leaf, glanced warily about, then sighed.

"I'm old. I've only a few years left me. I've been punished enough. Why can't she understand?"

Paul shrugged. Meredith breathed: "She hates me and my wife . . . she'll always mistrust us . . . we have no chance of fighting her. Li-kong's son was taken and a message sent to him—but no reply. We're licked. All we can do is . . . wait. I know it now. But you . . ."

He paused significantly, licked dry lips. "But you!" he said again.

"I—what?"

"She loves you! She said so!"

Paul's laughter came cold from the dank tomb of his heart. "Let her love me, then. I can't return it."

"I know." It seemed to Paul that Meredith knew a great deal, or was pretending so to draw information from him. Licked—Meredith licked? His approach savored of a wily general garnering strategic facts for another campaign. Meredith hurried on: "And even if she loves you—we've heard what kind of love it is. Psychopathic—demented! You won't last long with her—not as she is now. So while you have your chance, take it—the chance my wife won't get, nor I."

"What's that?"

"She loves you! Then, for the time being at least—she trusts you. Go to her—pretend you're as crazy for her as she is for you"—Meredith did not realize his irony—"and while she's—er, interestingly occupied—kill her!"

Paul sprang from his chair, cigarettes and lighter dropping to the floor. Meredith cowered. Paul roared: "What the hell are you saying!"

Meredith's hands fluttered in frantic, appeasing gesture. "But it's kill or be killed—and you know it!"

Paul turned from him, said softly: "I can't kill her—first because I'd as soon be dead as alive. Second—because something I loved is still within her." His eyes clouded; he blinked. "It would be like violating her tomb!"

Meredith cackled thin laughter. "A tomb indeed! Listen!" He leaned forward eagerly. "I'll pay you more than you've ever dreamed if you'll do it."

"To save your skin?" Paul tipped back head, laughed savagely. "I don't want your money, Meredith. What good is it to me now?"

Craftily, Meredith said: "You'll forget her in time. There are other women. Beautiful ones who want you. They can make you forget." He rubbed hands together. "Margot, now. You'd stand by while the fox kills Margot?"

"I don't give a damn what the fox-woman does!"

"But—Margot loves you."

"Damn Margot!" Then Paul's eyes widened at the enormity of the suggestion. "What are you doing—offering me your wife?" Meredith nodded violently. "What kind of a man are you?"

Meredith collapsed into a huddle, snivelled forlornly: "But I don't want to die . . . I don't want to die . . ." He bit his nails, wagged his head in lament, wattles swinging. "Not as she would have me die . . . I'd give my soul to whoever helped me . . ."

Paul spat. "Your soul! You haven't got one! Or

if you had, you killed it along with your brother!"

Meredith changed character abruptly. He straightened, said brusklly: "You talk big—now. Maybe you won't talk so big later on—when the fox is through with you!" He said enviously: "I wish I had your opportunity—I'd light out of here so fast that the air would burn behind me!"

"You would. I can't."

"No—you can't! You're the faithful dog starving at its master's grave, the ghost haunting the ruined house." He arose, warily edged toward the door for all his proud stance. "Why don't you try to leave—maybe that might teach you something! Wake up from your apathy! Even at this minute she's making a fool of you!"

"She is?"

"You're mad as she! Can't you understand, I'm trying to help you!"

"Incidentally helping yourself. Really, Meredith, you're rather a remarkable person." Meredith started. "You have more phases than a chameleon—but it's only on the surface. It always boils down to self-preservation."

Meredith could afford generosity. "Granted." He played his trump card. "If I were you, I'd consider myself. No, I mean physically. Look carefully and tell me whether you see something wrong."

Paul inspected his person. He saw in the mirror that his tie had been knotted awry; nothing else. He wondered as he straightened it why Meredith chortled so gleefully.

Meredith said: "After you gave me the cigarette, you tried to tuck the package and lighter into your coat. They fell on your lap, but you didn't notice."

Paul dipped hands in his pockets; they were empty. He saw the cigarettes and lighter, now on the floor. He said: "What of it?"

"Fool!" Meredith crowed. "You think you're clothed? You're naked—stark naked!" As Paul goggled, he almost danced in delight.

Paul searched the mirror again. Meredith had been right. No wonder the place had seemed cold! Yet he was sure he had dressed after his bath.

"You wouldn't have gone far from the house in that condition," Meredith gloated. "Because she wants you here!" He opened the door an inch or so, scanned the hall before swinging the portal wider. He crossed the threshold. "Maybe when you get some sense back, you'll be coming to me! Remember—I'll pay you. And—there's Margot!"

Paul went for him. "Shut that door, Meredith—and don't let me see you again! I don't give a hoot for you, or your money, or your harridan wife, understand?"

But the door was closed already. He laid out fresh clothing, hoping that in this instance it was not of a figmentary nature.

His altercation with Meredith had restored him more than he knew. Now his body asserted its rights. He was hungry. His brain was utterly fatigued from cycles of thought which had carried him nowhere. Less from appetite than to give himself something to do, he started out for a prow through the pantry.

The ground floor was in darkness. He wandered in search of Tuke, switching on the lights as he passed through the rooms. Perhaps like the other servants, those who had fled eerie noises and ominous sights to be replaced by Yin Hu's phantoms—perhaps Tuke also had taken French leave.

Fien-wi found Paul engaged on this quest. She

did not bow to him. Straight-backed, head high, she waved a hand to him, motioning him to stop. He paused. She stood a little way from him, regarding him with tenderness almost maternal. Then reached out, patted him on his sleeve.

Disquieting wisdom had left her eyes. She was all human. Now why was that? Then he realized that, though she could understand Jean and Yin Hu as separate entities, their combination into the newcomer was utterly beyond her ken. The composite being, stranger to her, was neither the fox to whom she had been pledged nor the girl she had nursed—was one to whom she had no definite tie.

He wondered that she remained at all in the house; decided that like himself she had lost the guiding purpose of her life and did not care enough for herself to go—perhaps remained out of loyalty and lonesomeness for Jean and Yin Hu, even as he. What had Meredith called him? "A faithful dog starving at its master's grave." Yes, he was that. And the brown woman with him.

Her black eyes large and burning, she seemed to be attempting some sort of ocular communication. A few words she murmured in her own tongue, but halted almost as she began, since he would not understand them. Urgently he gripped her, whispered: "You're trying to tell me something! What?"

Sorrowfully she shook her head, stared helplessly about as though hoping an interpreter had presented himself. She bent head thoughtfully, raised it with a sudden smile of inspiration. She tapped first the region of his heart, then her own; lifted two fingers widely splayed. Slowly she drew them together.

He grasped her thought. She was saying by her signs that their two hearts were as one, that they felt alike over what had happened. He nodded acquiescence.

Now she elevated sparse brows, wrinkling her forehead in puzzlement, plainly asking—what to do?

He shrugged, throwing out his palms in the universal gesture of helplessness. Her reply to that was a dejected twisting down of her mouth's corners. She sighed and he sighed with her. Then she fondled his sleeve again, smiled approvingly, consolingly. He was in some measure lifted from despondency—at least the brown woman liked him now.

She indicated the door, made her fingers scurry like running feet, shook her head. "I know," he said. "I dare not run away."

She pointed upstairs, grimaced dreadfully, waved her hands in exaggeratedly mystic passes. She had to repeat the performance several times before he grasped that she was picturing the fox-woman. That image clear, she scowled satanically and drew a fingertip across his throat. The fox-woman meant him no good, she was saying. And finished triumphantly by placing her back to his chest, fighting off fictive foes with fending hands—she would protect him from harm, so she told him.

And why? She pondered his expression of query, then repeated the first gesture of the two fingers glued together. They thought alike, he and she. The implications went deeper. They both had loved Jean; common bereavement had made them partners.

One day he was to remember this moment, to wonder then whether it was not the same as now

. . . two lonely people united in remembrance of their dead . . .

She hesitated, long enough to divorce all previous actions from the one to follow. Then with a look of sadness she crooked a beckoning finger. He followed her—up the steps to the fox-woman's door. She opened it for him, stood away to let him pass. Then went ahead of him, pulled aside a leaf of one screen, motioned him to proceed. Still with that mournful *mein*. And he knew her meaning. She had brought him here despite her misgivings. He must not blame her for whatever was to come.

He went forward; she remained behind. He had his apprehensions, none clearly definable. Certainly none of them anticipated what now confronted him.

He stepped into a chamber whose walls, of peculiar misty blue, seemed luminescent, casting a diffused glow which dispelled all shadows. At the windows hung silks of the same atmospheric color. So airy was the quality of the azure that he had no means of judging the room's proportions.

It was as though floor and ceiling were suspended in limitless skyey space. The rug was the green like that on the back of a wild drake; it was patterned with gigantic white peonies and drifting yellow butterflies.

There was no furniture. The room was bare save for a painted scroll hanging on one wall with the distinct impression that it was floating in air from a gossamer wire, no solidity behind it. He recognized it as akin to the one he had seen in the museum, the one Yin Hu had called a *shen* painting; either it tints had been mixed by a master of subtlety, or they had faded to an inexhaustible range of nearly neutral greys. It was a forest scene. The gods of the compass guarded its corners.

Before it stood that being he could call neither his love's name nor Yin Hu; who must be known to him henceforth simply as . . . fox-woman. She wore what he supposed was Oriental negligée, a pajama effect of cobweb-grey silk, the coat covered with frail, blood-red embroideries, the trousers very loose and daringly transparent. On her feet were silk mandarin slippers stitched with the blood-red designs.

At her throat was a necklace of evenly matched Ming ambers, yellow and opaque, interspersed with tiny globes of lapis. On thumb and forefinger were cloisonné nail-guards. Her bronze-and-russet hair was plaited with moth-colored ribbons, a braid hanging from each temple, two down her back and another drawn over her crown from ear to ear.

Such costume would have deepened the beauty of Jean or Yin Hu. But this stranger, this fox-woman, was not beautiful. As ever before, that slim body was lovely in line and mass and color—but what resided in it, permeated it, radiated from it—was not lovely, no! For as madness is ugly, his woman—neither of one world nor another, but a dweller between them, indeed a demi-goddess—was ugly.

Even so, she fascinated and compelled as a deadly serpent looping gracefully, flashing its baleful eyes, fascinates and compels. Grudgingly he admired her—yet felt unclean that he could so admire. He hated her! But underlying that hate was hint of love.

She held out hands to him in welcome, smiling. He did not wish to approach her? He could not help himself! He stopped tensely before her; she reached, curved hands behind his nape, pulled his face down to hers for a kiss. It was gall mixed with honey, nauseating, sending a shudder through him. She laughed and released him, moved away.

He heard steps behind him. Margot entered clad in rustling white taffeta. It was a housecoat but it suggested bridal array. Her gold-ash hair hung loose as an unmarried maiden's. But her face was old, her blue eyes sunken and shadowed, webbed around with wrinkles, the cheekbones skeletally prominent, the muscles sagging about the beautifully formed but colorless mouth—as though each kiss of the past robbed it of pigmentation. Her body was exquisite still. She seemed a young girl hiding behind an oldster's mask.

Wearily, tonelessly, she asked: "You sent for me?"

Casually as if reporting on the weather the fox-woman said: "Your passing is almost upon you, Aunt. So I called you, yes—to give you a parting gift."

"A parting gift!"

"One you have longed for always, Aunt."

Margot's lackluster gaze roamed the rug, the hazy walls, fastened on Paul. She said nothing, only held her eyes to his; but her breast shook with sobs, from those eyes crept tears.

He could not bear to see her cry. Suddenly indifference fled from him. Jean was lost to him, yes—and no longer he cared for himself. Still there were others who could feel pain, and he had selfishly ignored them in coddling his grief. He went to Margot, slipped an arm about her. She relaxed against him, sobbing now aloud.

Selfish she was and callous. But was it entirely her fault? And she was—woman. He said curtly: "Fox-woman—you've done enough! Let her be!"

Her eyes thinned to spiteful slits. She snapped: "What I have done is as nothing to what I will do! Leave her!"

He would not budge. She fluttered to him, pulled on his arms unavailing; struck and tugged again. Then backed away, eyes wide with fury, mouth squared by a snarl.

Yet she said softly, in monotone: "Do not play with me, lover mine—let the woman go!"

Now Margot shamed him by slipping from his hold, by stepping aside, more concerned for his safety than her own. She fingered the tears from her eyes, drew herself proudly straight, wistfully said: "It is my fault—my weakness." Eyes level on the fox-woman's mad ones, she furthered: "I ask you for mercy. Surely you know what it is now!"

"Yes—now I know it! But it is not for you."

"Then," Margot said, her voice catching in her throat, "do as you like with me—only, get it done."

The fox-woman mocked: "As if I had any thought of doing otherwise!"

She altered her voice to secretive confiding: "Compose yourself, Aunt—you need not fear—not yet! We are gathered less for the meting of justice than to present you a farewell offering—did I not tell you so? We go to obtain for you what most you desire of life: self-realization amid perfection, a timeless fulfillment of all life's promise. The bait," she whispered, "of the wicked gods who

rule this world, enticing freed souls into fresh existence for further torment."

She said: "Being what I am, I will despoil the gift by explaining its utter worthlessness. Perfection is not to be found except within oneself. When found, life can be seen for what it is—illusion. The evil gods have no power over the soul once it has risen from delusion. You never searched your heart, Aunt. You were too preoccupied by the fantasy of living, too eagerly snapping at the wicked gods' bait." Margot wavered fretfully, impatiently. "And now—we embark on our quest."

She turned to the *tanka*, waved summons. "Come!"

Incredulously they stared. Why—what had happened to the *shen* painting? Its forest had stretched into stereoscopic perspective, was no longer two-dimensional nor paint! As though through a window—no, a door—for the silken scroll was very large—they looked out upon a landscape greyed as though by clouded sky.

In each corner of that doorway, on slowly curling thrones of mist, the Devils of the Four Directions stirred, flexed muscles as though awakening from deepest sleep; shifted to positions of greater ease, leaned forward, contemplating the fox-woman and her two charges. They were not the small figures of the picture. They were diminutive, but only because seen from a distance.

The blue around Paul was air itself.

Something yellow flashed past him like a tossed golden coin. He followed it with his eyes—a yellow butterfly! And it was not alone—the azure reaches were crowded with them, flickering star-like as they fluttered in errant zigzags, sometimes in chase of each other, coupling and separating over the swaying heads of the prodigious white flowers.

He looked down. He stood on fine greensward like short grass of early springtime. The peonies grew to his waist. They walled him in frail barrier from Margot and the fox-woman. He touched one—it was cool and silken-smooth. He bent and inhaled its pungent sweetness. A butterfly twinkled past, caressed his cheek with fingers of wind. His reason told him that flowers and butterflies were but the pattern on the green rug; all his senses insisted that they were realities!

"Come," the fox-woman said again, moving among the nodding flowers. The brocade border of what had been the painting hung in the air like a curtain with a rectangular hole in its center. She stepped through the opening, paused on the far side and beckoned.

Margot hesitated, looked anxiously behind her. He read her thought. She would turn back if she could. But there was no horizon, only the endlessness of white blooms stretching into, and losing themselves among, the blue veils of infinitude: a dancing-floor for the golden butterflies—nothing of reality, as she had known it, on which to cling. She might as well go forward as backward. She followed the fox-woman through the silken doorway, but as she went, she sobbed.

Again the fox-woman cried peremptorily: "Come!" And hooked forefinger to Paul.

He plodded through the peonies; their waxen-white heads bumped him softly, their stems crackled underfoot. The landscape widened beyond the opening as he approached it. He paused, shook the thin, silken frame. It rippled exactly as

if it were what it looked—a pierced hanging, dangling in air. He stepped over its sagging edge, touched hard-packed earth.

They advanced, Margot haltingly, fearfully, toward the floating shapes ahead. Oddly the cloudy thrones crawled and seethed as if torpidly alive! There was no wind. The air was clear as grey glass.

Larger grew the gods and larger, as the three covered the sterile ground approaching them. The two higher ones, as if riding peculiar adaptations of magic carpets, steered themselves on a level with the others; ranged themselves in a row of four. The row hovered twenty feet or so above the pebbled soil.

As the gods grew, Paul felt himself dwindling by comparison. Margot fell back, whimpering. He fondled her, took her hand, gripped it. She took courage. Like babes indeed in a darkening wood, hand in hand they followed the fox-woman.

Now details of the four monstrous beings were clearer. They sat motionless, waiting. All were ridiculously broad, as though natural obesity were accentuated by stiffly spraying folds of many dull-hued robes and long-coats. One's head was blue-skinned, the eyes very small, the nose broad and flat and curiously bovine; the wide mouth lipless, a crooked gash. Horns curved from brownish wisps of hair.

Another was elephant-headed, his skin chalk-white—but instead of one trunk, he had three. The third god, like Sebek of the Egyptians, had a crocodile's snout. The fourth bore a horse's head, white as the elephant's; his bulging robe was sewn with golden coins.

Immobile they sat, yet their breasts rose and fell in breathing, and slowly their heads turned, their eyes glinted, intent on the nearing pilgrims. How tall they were, standing or seated, Paul could not determine. Greater in bulk than the Sphinx, than the fabled Colossus of Rhodes, that was certain. About them was nothing of hostility nor amiable welcome. Not even curiosity. Rather, only an aloof interest, as that with which a man might regard an ant at his feet.

"They're alive," Margot whispered, fingers squirming in Paul's grasp. "Oh—my God—they're alive!"

"Steady," Paul murmured. "We know it's only illusion."

She shook her head. "If it's illusion—it should vanish when we recognize it. And it doesn't! No, it's real, and they're—alive!"

XVIII

NOW they were almost beneath the hovering clouds. The fox-woman dipped knee in homage to each of them. The heads of the four rocked slowly as if in acknowledgement. As if the huge beings were tremendous replicas of those bistre mantel ornaments whose heads, affixed to shoulders on springs, are sent swaying at any least touch.

The three humans passed under the thrones. The forest was near, a rising sweep of dusky

pinetrees. Paul looked back. On their restless thrones the four gods sat, backs to him.

The ground was sprinkled with tiny stones that kicked underfoot, rattling. Margot in high heels was having difficulty. She tripped on her sweeping hem, used free hand to lift skirt over ankles.

A path wound among the trees. They ascended its easy incline. As the path swerved, cutting off all view of what lay behind, Paul turned for a last look at the Lokapalas. They were smaller now with distance, still with backs to him on their misty thrones. The trees shut them from sight.

The air was sharp with forest fragrance; sharper still with a dusty reek, the smell of things taken from long and neglectful storage. The acrid taint of the grime which, filming the *shen* picture, had become one with its atmosphere.

With a frail cry that fuzzed in the ears, a shadowy bird whirled from a thicket, arrowed past them and up into the treetops. They heard, as the path neared the hill's crest, a faint voice rising and falling. A girl's voice, singing.

She came over the summit, a wooden yoke on her shoulders, staved pails swinging from it. She was perhaps eighteen, Chinese, in drab loose shift. Hair, skin and clothing were but faintly colored—as though grey pigment had been sprayed on them.

Her buckets splashed dark drops, staining the path with black stars. He wondered whither she was bound. She paused to stare at them, took hand from one of the buckets, touched her own cheeks, hair and dress—plainly piqued to curiosity by the unwontedly brilliant hues of these outsiders. Then winced at the fox-woman's expression. She plodded away, wistfulness and fear in her gaze.

The three topped the crest, paused and stared. The path was joined on the downward grade by a tortuous, rutted road. It led past tilled drear fields to a valley city. Beyond, rounded peaks rose from haze.

Up from the valley, as the fox-woman urged them down the path, lifted many sounds—the barking of dogs, the shouts of playing children, the hollow echo of a hammer's blows, the rhythmic scratch of a saw; and from the city, an occasional gong note sonorously rolling like brazen thunder.

Indeed, all sounds in this world were thin and metallic, all of one timbre; but soon Paul became accustomed to them, accepted them as full and varied.

They passed fields and farm-huts, sighted people in nondescript garb at work in the gardens. Not always were their skins yellow, their hair black. Only a few straightened to stare after them; even less waved—and then timidly.

Margot whispered nervously: "Paul—where are we?"

"As far as I can tell—in the painting. Yin Hu said it's a spirit-refuge."

She peeped about. "Then these are ghosts we see? But they seem real!"

He cheered her: "They're ghosts in just the way we are. For I've a hunch, Margot—we're inside no picture at all, but in the fox-woman's blue room, simply hypnotized into believing a pipe-dream."

"Then you think Erwin was right—she's not a witch?" She murmured introspectively: "Poor Erwin!"

He said: "Right or not—Erwin doubtless would have been able to explain this."

She answered: "His ability to explain didn't save him from death!"

The road crossed a trail, was later joined by others. They heard the thump of drums and saw wailing of strings. They looked down one fork of the highway, saw a band of musicians leaping and gesticulating in the fore of a draped palanquin borne on the shoulders of many men in livery. It was less a lively procession than the memory of one, for the colors were subdued to the point of solemnity, as if one dug through the dust of the years for this vision.

Despite all its movement and sound, this whole world lacked the life of color. Even the tall grass, lacking true tint, was without enlivening fire, sickly and diseased.

The city neared, its architecture a curious jumble. Over thatched huts and mud-brick hovels, the structures reared in fantastic pile, as if gathered from many lands and historical periods and thrown helter-skelter in a mound. Predominately there were pagodas and the sweeping low-lying palaces of true Chinese style. But Paul recognized a Cambodian Wat, its stepped pyramid garnished with countless intricate sculptures like the sugar-work on a tremendous and grimy wedding-cake; the turrets of a Muslime mosque with an enormous teardrop dome, its facade embellished with glazed tiles and pierced by a pointed arch; a Doric temple from archaic Hellas; a wall faced with terra-cotta relief of heavy-muscled, snarling lions and broken by a gate flanked with winged bulls—from the empire of the Chaldeans; and an ornate Renaissance dwelling from the Florence of da Vinci's time.

Among these edifices loomed trees whose grey-leaved branches feathered out like the edges of storm-clouds; some maculated with flowers of ghostly grey. There were tall evergreens like Gothic spires. On some walls, vines crawled thickly, like rising tides of shadow.

Dusty, the highroad ran, and long. The edges of Margot's skirt darkened with dirt. Dust settled thickly on their faces and clothing, powdered them grey, made them colorless as all else in this monochromatic world. Now they encountered other travelers—not all peasants nor Orientals; some in couples, in groups; others alone.

There were Moroccan men in baggy drawers, short jackets, tarbooshes on their heads; accompanied by veiled persons in such voluminous robes that they were indistinguishable as women. There were Hindu maids in saris, African negroes quite naked, armed with assegais. There were people in European dress, both the costumes of centuries ago and of today.

They were not always afoot. Some were mounted on shaggy ponies, on burros, horses and camels—or riding litters, sedan-chairs, rickshaws and carts. He saw elaborate carriages from rococo Austria, the chariots of the Greeks and Romans.

And if these pilgrims were ghosts, Paul thought that the *shen* painting must have been carried far over earth's face to receive them during the centuries of its existence.

They behaved precisely as any crowd in any cosmopolitan center, saw nothing extraordinary in their motley comrades, clothing or conveyances. For them this world had long ceased to be wondrous. A few of their faces were passionate with remnants of life, more were fretful, and the most

were blank as though resigned to the apathy of interminable boredom.

They spoke many languages, those who spoke at all. The air hummed with their mingled murmurs, was at times cleaved by a gay or angry cry. A Czarist Cossack leaned from his horse, passing Margot, laughed and called to her: "*Zdras dvoe tchek, raibyanuk?*" He saw the fox-woman, started and hastily reined away. Once a carriage rolled past like a timeworn version of Cinderella's coach, horses grey as mice, footmen froglike in drab trappings. A bewigged gentleman peeped from its window, critically surveying Margot through the single lens of his lorgnette, tittered: "S'death—'tis but the veriest doxy!" And took his face from the opening.

A sharp-eyed Ghawazi girl, surely an houri, jangled her bracelets in Paul's face as she pressed against him, laughed at him: "*Khatrak, ya sidi—give me thy favor!*" She caught his hand—he felt the touch numbly—she curled his fingers around a star-tipped key. "Soon—the last house in *Chang-chi* court," she breathed, casting a wary underlook toward the fox-woman. And slipped away, was lost among others.

They passed through a pillared gateway guarded by prodigious sculptured cones, *stupas*. The roof of the portal was two tiered, its ridgepole curving upward in dragon carvings, its eaves like horns and hung with silent bronze bells.

They entered a market-place at whose stalls grey people bargained for grey bread and beggars squatted, lifting alms-bowls and whining for contributions. Margot said: "I'm tired and hungry. Can't we buy something to eat?"

The fox-woman laughed. "Tired you may be—and hungry—but here you dare not rest! Like Persephone of olden myth, if you taste the food of this realm, you never can leave it. We are here only on sufferance of the *Lokapalas*, the *shen* guardians. We may pass through this domain, but we may not pause. We overstay our leave—we are held in thrall. Bound here forever. And at its best, it is but a shadow world, its pleasures half pain."

Enviously Margot stared at a Parisian cocotte of the Eighties in bustle and frills, swinging useless ruffled parasol as she walked with an arm linked in that of a broad shouldered Hellenic athlete in short tunic, laurel in his hair.

She said: "Maybe they're shadows—but all my pleasures have been half pain. I'd like to stay here, I think."

Decisively the fox-woman shook her head. "I have something far more to your taste than this!" And inexorably drew them onward.

Past hovel and palace they went, from squalor to wealth and—as they passed through to the outskirts of the town—to squalor again. They went beneath the roof of another gate from which bold-eyed sentries scanned them; they descended into mist. And here the road branched in many routes. The fox-woman chose one almost choked by grass and weeds, apparently seldom used.

They went on until Paul could no longer see the city. They entered a narrow gorge whose frowning walls hulked rocky and sheer to the smoked sky. A torrent roared beside them, dashing over gigantic boulders, splashing them with its spray. Moss bearded the leafless limbs of leaning trees, whisked their faces.

The gorge ended on a precipice, the torrent

leaping from it in a widening waterfall. They struggled down a serpentine path at times overgrown with brambles . . . and on and on . . . reached rolling ground . . . passed great estates . . . crossed the waterfall's now placid river by way of soaring crescent bridges . . . until Paul could remember little beyond walking and walking . . . as though ever since birth he had been travelling . . .

Now before him drifted four lazily stirring clouds, each bearing dark bulk, like thrones. The Lokapalas! Had he and the women made grand circuit then of the *shen* world, returned to their starting point?

He was a shade disappointed. And was this all? Where was the gift promised to Margot by the fox-woman?

The gods sat with backs turned against the three. They passed under the clouds, looked up to heads of elephant and demon, crocodile and horse. The fox-woman again curtsied in tribute to them, led her charges over barren plain to where stood a black rectangle like a large slate. Nearing it, Paul discerned that it was no chalkboard but an opening like a dark tunnel entrance, without frame—a black hole in the air itself! They paused on its verge, peered within.

He expected the blue airiness of the peony-carpeted chamber they had left. He gazed instead into a room he did not recognize at first, though it was familiar; glimpsed doorways and other rooms beyond. It was very dark. Night-glow seeped from windows high over the floor; faintly touched glass display cases, walls hung with paintings and broken by sculptures.

The Chinese rooms of the museum!

The fox-woman seated herself, edged in a light leap from the *shen*-world's threshold to the museum's floor. She turned, reached to them. Paul dropped after her, assisted Margot down. They had entered the dark museum through what seemed to be a window opening on grey landscape. He knew it for the transfigured *tanka* on which, days before, Yin Hu had commented.

Margot wheeled, taking in her surroundings; cringed, hands clutching her breast. She asked: "Where are we?" And whispered: "The museum!"

The fox-woman dipped fingers under the flap of her coat, brought forth a tinder box and something dark and dry like a twisted mandragora root. She gave the tinder box to Paul. It was carved jade, its top inlaid with a steel rasp.

"Strike light," she said.

He opened the box. Within was a claw of flint and wadded fibers. He snapped the box shut, reached into his pocket for cigarette lighter. It would not function.

He scratched the flint on the steel, sent a spark into the dry fluff. It flared; he blew it to crawling blue flame. There was something strange about that flame. It spread tackily like thick oil; was blotched with leprous white. Magic fire for magic spell—no wonder his lighter had failed him!

Quickly the fox-woman touched the dry and shrivelled thing to it—and it was not mandrake but an embalmed human hand! Its fingers caught the flame like five wicks. Holding it aloft like a torch, the fox-woman took the tinder box from Paul, closed it, snuffing its sickly flame.

Margot was no longer afraid, was standing straight, hands at sides. With scorn she said:

"Now I know it's only a dream!"

Dream or no, one question troubled Paul. He asked: "If you can travel through the *tankas*, fox-woman, can you cross the ocean—back to Yun-nan?"

She said: "No. The ocean is wide—thousands of miles! One can travel only the distance shown in the picture. A hundred miles? Yes—until even the highest peak is lost beyond the horizon. But thousands of miles with their landmarks—in a two-dimensional painting? It is too much to ask!"

He thought: *It's a pity the shen painters weren't like Picasso and some of the modern surrealists whose work, like fourth-dimensional diagrams, can show simultaneously back and front—yes, and all sides—of an object!* And wondered what a journey through those pictures might be like.

Now the fox-woman moved past the glass cases toward a doorway. They followed. The five flames cast the least of light. As a torch, the hand was useless. But the fox-woman had not brought it to illumine their way.

They came to a wrought-iron grill which barred them from the dark foyer beyond. The fox-woman touched the burning fingers to the lock; it clicked. The grill swung open. They entered the foyer, a domed empty space looking upon the gates to the other wings. The grand staircase sweeping up from it was lost in blackness. Their feet tapped hollowly on the tiled floor, and phantom footfalls echoed back.

The fox-woman paused, cocked her head toward the outer doors and the offices just inside them, listening. "Hist!"

Then: "Stay in this spot—on your lives, do not stir!"

She left them, went to the offices. In the gloom she was but a blur, the five lights gliding like a squadron of glow-worms. Soon she returned. "The watchman sleeps now," she said. Paul wondered if the watchman had been sleeping when she discovered him, decided not. Her words held their own story.

They crossed the murky foyer, halted before another grill locking the Grecian Wing. Again the fox-woman opened it with the aid of the mummy's hand. They went down the sculpture-lined corridor to its very end. Stopped and turned.

Daintily the fox-woman stamped a foot, hardly making a sound. Light dawned in the hall—not from the windows but rather as though the air itself caught fire. From soft yellow glimmering it brightened to dusky red, became a clear and brilliant orange—as though all the atmosphere were cool, quiescent flame. The sculptures were sharply visible, but oddly flattened by the even illumination—for the light came from every side and permitted no shadow.

The fox-woman gloated on Margot. She cooed: "Here is what I promised you!"

Carelessly she blew out the five flames, cast the hand aside. She gestured; a flirt of her fingers too swift to be charted.

For a moment nothing happened. The air burned orange, steadily. Nothing more.

Now this was their situation: they stood beside the model of the Parthenon at the hall's end. On their right the wall ran to the grilled entrance. Under a chipped marble frieze of girl musicians, their long robes streaming as they moved in frozen dance, was first—the statue of a faun with pipes, leaning against a stump; then a pedestal bearing

a vase painted with struggling warriors; a naked nymph; a captive soldier pressing the point of a broken spear into his breast, grinning as if the pain were pleasure.

On their left was another battered frieze of damaged horsemen, beneath it the Lysippos athlete so admired by Margot on a previous occasion; another pedestal and vase, its paintings this time being satyrs in pursuit of maidens; an Aphrodite in clinging draperies, and the Laocoön group of naked father and two sons struggling in the grip of weaving snakes.

The center of the floor was occupied by a cast of the Winged Victory and a pair of tyrant-slayers, bare but with helmets on heads and swords in hands; these like islands.

Through the orange glow came the measured sound of chipping!

From far down the hall it came. It might have been the tapping of a workman's hammer—but the museum had been dark! Tracing the sound, Paul's eyes came to the figure of the fettered soldier with the spear at breast. The statue was—moving! Blank eyes gazing vacantly, lips stretched in meaningless archaic smile, the soldier slowly flexed and unbent his arm, jabbing the spear-point against his bosom as if to puncture the stony skin. Thence came the chipping sounds. And the movement was mechanical as if the arm were on hinges and swayed by hidden springs.

Across from it was further motion. The snakes of the Laocoön group had been carved so sinuously that the beholder's eye, following their dynamic curves, received the impression of motion. That motion was an actuality now—the serpents, white and elastic as long rolls of dough, were stirring, sliding. A shudder shook the human figures of Laocoön and his sons. As if until now paralysed by terror, they had been awakened to action by the sliding snakes!

They strained against the slipping coils, pulled and pushed on them, all three humans lurching to and fro on their support. Where hands touched stony, scaly loops, where feet lifted and lowered, seeking more advantageous stance, they—clanked!

The fox-woman eagerly eyed Margot, who seemed unmoved. It was only a dream, her attitude said plainly.

Laocoön threw back his head as the snakes grated tightening over his chest. He shrieked—but without sound. He wrenched the coils from himself, threw them writhing to the floor; they thudded like boulders but did not break, wriggled over the tiles with the noise of sliding rock. While Laocoön assisted his sons against the other two serpents, the one on the floor slid to the base of the Winged Victory.

She was but a plaster cast tinted to resemble antique stone. Headless, armless, only a pair of widespread wings on a draped and forward-straining body.

She jerked to life as the snake slid over her toes. She flapped her wings! Awkwardly she fluttered, body too heavy for her pinions, doubling her legs in a jackknife leap which carried her from her dais and the snake to the floor. She bounced from the tiles, fluttering haphazardly, now to one side, again to another. The breeze from her wings was a breath of life to whatever she passed. The tyrant-killers started as if shocked, glared with white eyes. The Aphrodite stirred languorously, sensuously. The nymph lifted hands in surprise.

Paul thought: *It's like the circus tableaux when powdered people in skin-tight white costumes appear as living statues!*

On the friezes the girl musicians struck their tambors, touched flutes to lips, dancing forwards and backwards, never turning, as though their hidden sides were glued to their background. On the opposite wall the horsemen guided their prancing steeds up the edge of their slab and hung inverted as they rode to the other edge and down in endless procession.

Around the vases the painted figures ran—satyrs after nymphs, warrior pursuing warrior!

While the headless Victory flurried about, striking and rebounding from the tiles like a decapitated fowl, Laocoön and one son pried a second snake loose and cast it away; the three figures made short work of the third. From the sounds it seemed that a gang of workmen were at labor in a quarry.

Aphrodite speculatively measured the distance between the floor and her perch, sat down and edged herself gingerly to the tiles. The nymph leaped lightly. Aphrodite sauntered, heavy hips swaying, toward the captive soldier who still prodded himself with his spear. The nymph hurried toward the faun but paused on her way to marvel at the battle of the vase's painted figures. She drew within a few yards of the humans. Margot cowered back. The nymph stood on tiptoe, patting the faun's legs, rousing him. His head angled; he looked down to her. Raised his pipes and seemed to blow into them, but silently.

Meanwhile Aphrodite had reached the soldier, caught his wrist and restrained him from abortive attempt at suicide. He stared at her, still grinning as before, then flung away his spear, embraced her. Contentedly she nestled against him.

Laocoön's sons dropped to the floor. One retrieved the spear and tossed it to his father, who stabbed it into the third snake. The other paused, regarding the tyrannicides. He cut a caper, hurried to the slab on which they stood, waved to them in hero-worship. One nudged the other. They straightened up proudly, flexing their muscles. He reached to them; one man amiably passed down his sword, the other contributed his helmet. The boy pranced about, swinging the sword, playing soldier.

The nymph leaned comfortably on the faun's base, mooning at him as he pantomined piping with much exaggerated swaying and tossing of head and shoulders.

Laocoön was down on the floor, stabbing the other snakes with his spear.

The tyrant-slayers sprang down. One hurried to Aphrodite, quite literally tapping her to gain her attention. She lifted a shoulder in scorn; he caught her around the waist, dragging her down to him. The soldier scrambled after, was hampered by his bonds, tripped and fell flat. The youth carried Aphrodite to his own pedestal, boosted her upon it, vaulted after her. Soon she was cuddled lovingly against him.

The soldier unwound the ropes which had tripped him, cast them clattering away, went to claim Aphrodite. Her current lover did not look up from embrace but deftly planted a foot on the soldier's cheek, sent him sprawling. Laocoön's unoccupied son politely helped him to rise.

The other tyrant-killer had caught the nymph. Entwined, they danced to the inaudible music of

the faun's pipes, their feet clanking. They reeled against the support of one of the amphoras, toppled it. The jar struck the tiles without breaking, rolled, leaving its pictures on the floor as if printing them there. They streamed, flat as cutouts over the tiles, with a curious suggestion of projected pictures on a screen.

The faun left his stump to follow the dancers. Laocoön, now that the last snake was stabbed, linked hands with his son and the soldier. They joined the dance. The Victory whirled wheeling over their heads. The boy with the sword attempted to draw his brother from the dance, could not; stood apart sourly eying the revelers. He caught sight of the grill, pushed it open, strode into the dark foyer in search of playmates. The faun went from the hall, like the Pied Piper luring the dancers behind him. Abandoned by the others, Aphrodite and her lover clung dreamily to each other.

However amorous her bent, Margot had no interest in them. Her lips were parted breathlessly, her eyes rapt—on Lysippos' athlete who was unconcernedly, indeed conceitedly, preening himself with his scraper.

"Ah," the fox-woman said, "you realize my thought when I promised something better."

Margot made no reply, moved toward the athlete. Nine feet in height, he loomed gigantic and white over her. Paul caught at her but was checked by the fox-woman. "This is what she has craved!" she murmured. "Let her have her one perfect moment! It will be short enough."

Slow step by slow step Margot approached the statue. He paused in his vain grooming of himself, looked her over, grinned. He crouched to lay his scraper aside, and she flinched backward—he was so very huge! He vaulted down to her side. She staggered back from him; he swept out an arm, fenced her with it, held her captive.

From the doorway came muffled sounds of distant stony footfalls. The horsemen of the frieze still rode in procession, their cracks and chipped areas like gaping wounds. On the undisturbed amphora the satyrs had caught the nymphs and were making rather violent love to them.

The tiny sculptures on the pediments of the miniature Parthenon were moving. Its gilded doors flew outward. Athena Parthenos, gigantic by comparison with the pedimental figures, though but little more than eighteen inches in actual height, crawled out. The tiny carvings left off their social activities and knelt to her. She raised her arms in extremely prefatory benediction—after all, she was goddess of Wisdom! One look she took at Aphrodite and her lover; she gaped in horror, hastily wormed through the door and back from sight.

Margot must have dreamed so frequently of a moment such as this that its occurrence verged on the natural. She had lost her fear. Her athlete stood high before her, arms folded across his brawny chest, head disdainfully lifted and eyelids drooping superciliously, condescending to her admiration. Cautiously she stood on tiptoe, touched a muscled forearm, squeezed it.

"Cold!" she whispered, 'cello strings singing. "Cold and hard!"

He opened arms, performed a cycle of calisthenics for her benefit, striking one pose after another. She clasped her hands in pleasure. As if he had courted her sufficiently, he bent, slipped an

arm around her waist. She colored, glancing askance at Paul and the fox-woman. He eyed them, sneered and shrugged, stooped to press his mouth on hers in a kiss. She arched backward, struggling, blood on her lips! His were no longer white but rouged with her blood. With white stone tongue he licked them.

Perhaps she had thought herself dreaming and so had submitted to him. The kiss had restored her to reality. She braced herself whimpering against his thighs, striving to pull away. Paul started forward—things were taking an ugly turn. He did not know what he could do; he knew he could not stand by and let this continue! The fox-woman whined angrily, struck him, paralysed him.

The athlete caught Margot to his breast, carried her struggling and screaming to a corner. Aphrodite and her lover nodded approval, forgot their own caresses in their interest.

Paul could not turn to see what went on in that corner. He could hear Margot's screams rising more and more desperately, becoming shriller, sustained until they were only one long outcry which dropped to a tortured gasp, a choking. Then silence.

The fox-woman removed his paralysis with a sweep of her hand. Surveyed the corner, beaming devilishly. On the faces of Aphrodite and her youth were amazement and disappointment, the look on a child's face when its new toy is broken. There was not much left of Margot when the athlete straightened from her. He was stained with her blood. She had wanted his embrace—she lay broken and twisted and red as though her mangled body had been doused in scarlet dye, her face pulped beyond all recognition.

The athlete ambled interestedly toward the fox-woman, paused to appraise her—compared her with dead Margot, smiled with an idea. Paul sprang forward. The athlete knotted his great hands into fists, squared off like a boxer.

Swiftly the fox-woman swept to his pedestal, caught up the discarded strigil. As the athlete lunged at Paul, a Goliath at David, she intervened. Paul dodged as the huge stone fist breezed past his ear, automatically fainted and started to swing an answering blow. The fox-woman's intercession brought him back to his senses, else he must later have nursed a fractured hand—if he lived through the contest! She flashed the scraper before the statue's eyes.

He forgot Paul, caught the dull blade, retreated a little way and began fastidiously to scratch the blood from himself.

Sick, Paul turned again to Margot—or what remained of her. *She said it's a dream! I hope to God she was right!*

The orange radiance flickered, dimmed and died. The hall was utterly black until his eyes were conditioned to dimness. He could not hear the dancers' footsteps nor the grind of the athlete's scraper; discerned in the murk that no figure moved.

The fox-woman caught his wrist, led him toward the entrance. They left the hall, crossed the domed lobby, entered the Chinese collection. The *shen tanka* like a beacon sent forth its cold grey light. Paul's muscles twitched from nervousness as he helped the fox-woman over the edge; hesitated, then climbed up after her.

The woman bowed to the Lokapalas, called to them in Chinese or perhaps the tongue of the foxes. The elephant-headed one reached a porcelain-white hand from his robes, bent and swooped the hand down like monstrous white bird. It rushed on Paul and the fox-woman like the jaws of a steam shovel, caught them on a rubbery palm and swung them upward in a breathless rush of wind.

The woman was bounced against Paul as the hand curved, its fingers caging them. He glimpsed a grey streak of landscape rushing below.

The fingers opened, the hand pulled back, catapulting the woman and Paul toward a distant blue doorway!

The air screamed in his ears as the opening seemed to rush toward them, swallowed them—he rolled over and over on a field of white flowers, their softness breaking his fall, clouds of yellow butterflies scattering—

They were back in the fox-woman's chamber! She was standing on the green carpet's design of peonies and butterflies. But Margot! Where was she?

It could only have been illusion, that whole museum episode. Margot was gone—had perhaps returned to her own quarters while he was dreaming. He staggered to his feet, dusty and tired as if indeed he had walked the miles of the *shen* world. And hating the fox-woman for the loathesome turn of mind which had given him that nightmare of the museum.

She was contemplating him with a chilly smile. Behind her the walls were blue, but a tint no longer atmospheric. And the painting was only a painting.

XIX

HE was in his own room, on his own bed . . . something was pricking his side, something in a pocket. Half-asleep, he felt for it . . . a key. Now how had he come into possession of it. The catch was star-shaped.

There was a cloud over his memory . . . it was hard to think . . .

He sat bolt upright, remembering. Of course! This was the key given him by the Ghawazi girl on the *shen* painting's dusty road.

Then the journey through the grey world had not been illusion! And Margot—

And Margot?

Stop a moment! Wait—before you despair! Couldn't the foxwoman have put the key in your hand when you were entranced?

It was comforting, but—was it truth?

Wide awake, he looked about. The sun was low, the windows translucent gold. He had slept all day, then. He recalled vaguely he had spent long hours with the fox-woman, but the images were so confused as to be meaningless. Whatever had happened, his conscious mind stubbornly refused to conjure any picture of it. He thought: *Then it must have been pretty bad!*

All he could clearly remember, after leaving the *shen* world, was walking at daybreak into this

room and flinging himself on the bed. He'd been feeling unhappy over something—he wondered what.

Margot! He must look in on her!

He went to her door, rapped on it. No answer. He twisted the catch, peeped in, calling softly. Then entered. She was not within. On impulse he hastened to her closets, inspected the rainbow array of clothing. There was no white taffeta robe visible. Nor were her white slippers among the neat rows of footgear.

Probably—he hoped—she was downstairs. He hastened below. In the library he encountered Meredith—the man was just setting the telephone on its cradle, completing a call.

And he had subtly changed, though his features were still the same. A man too small for his skin. But instead of slumping he was sitting straight, alert and coldly competent, efficiency in every line of him. For an instant, Paul wondered at the change; during that instant, Meredith appraised him with searching gaze, opened mouth to speak and pressed it tightly shut.

Whatever had been in his mind to say, he changed it, asked: "You were calling my wife?"

"I can't find her. And last night—" Paul quickly sketched what he thought must have happened last night, unconsciously considerate in stressing that it could have been only illusion.

Meredith was singularly unmoved. As Paul finished his telling, Meredith leaned to the radio and switched it on, dialling to a symphonic program.

Paul said: "I know she's around here, somewhere. She just can't have vanished!" He started for the door, pausing for Meredith to join him. Meredith stuck to his chair.

Shrugging, Paul continued his quest alone. Margot was not to be found. He returned to the library. The broadcast was louder now—Meredith was not listening to it but scratching aimlessly at his desk, cogitating. Paul hovered restlessly in the doorway. The symphonic program dragged to its close.

Then a voice: "Today on our Composer's Hour we have brought you the music of—"

Chimes. An announcer identifying the station. A transcribed advertisement. Then the voice: "Every hour on the hour, the New York Daily News brings you a summary of news events—"

And a bulletin that staggered him. Skin crawling coldly, he listened mesmerized. Meredith cocked an ear to the machine, smiling wryly. When the report came to its end, he snapped off the current.

Paul said: "But—my God! It's impossible!"

Meredith said simply, dryly: "It happened."

"You knew!"

"I guessed." As before, Meredith's eyes were narrowed calculatingly on Paul. As before, Paul wondered why.

That telephone call—could it have been from Li-kong? He said: "Now that Margot's gone—you're the last one left, Meredith." The man merely nodded. "You don't seem so very worried about it!"

"What will worrying accomplish? And—why the sudden sympathy?"

"You don't seem much upset over what happened to your wife."

"Wife—in name only. Should I lament the loss of one who did not love me, who only would have



HANNES BOK 1946

used me? She revealed herself more clearly than ever before, yesterday in the fox's room, if you'll recall! She'd have given anything to save *you*—"

Paul let it pass. "It's not like you to be so resigned to the inevitable."

"But I am not resigned—not at all! You're very solicitous, of a sudden. Suspiciously so. Well—if I have anything for the fox's ears, be sure they'll get it first hand."

He resumed scribbling on the pad, effectively dismissing Paul, who went to the fox-woman's quarters. Fien-wi opened the door to his knock, furtively smiling at him, as one plotter leers secretively to another.

He said: "Fox-woman!"

She was musing on one of the black chairs, lifted her head to ask: "Why not call me by name?"

"Yin Hu, then—"

"*Ai!* You know that I am not merely Yin Hu! Call me rather . . . Jean."

He snapped, nettled: "Whatever you are—Jean you're not!"

She arose, swayed toward him—no tenderness in her grey-green ties but rather craft and mockery. The cunning of Lilith, first spouse of Adam whose jealousy tricked him from Eden; the railery of Circe who turned men to beasts. Her mouth was a little awry, a bead of saliva on her twisted lips.

"I am partly Jean—give me her name."

"Does one call the machine after its cogs?"

She laughed, slipped serpentine hands crawling to his shoulders, swayed warmly against him. "Then call me—Beloved. After last night it is most fitting—"

He remembered now! He tore her hands from his shoulders, stepped back. She drooped as if sorely abashed, but there was a mischievous dimple in one cheek, merriment flickering in the jade-colored eyes.

He asked: "After you kill Charles Meredith—what?"

She considered dreamily, head listing aside. "The world is ours for the taking. All its treasures are yours. Together we will loot the globe! Where magic cannot prevail, money gathered by magic will! Who can withstand me? None! Not even you—most reluctant of suitors!"

She cried spitefully: "And how I will laugh when you turn from your stolen booty, hating it and me with all your honest heart! For I love you, love you—and never can hurt you enough—"

And as he backed still farther, she reached unsteadily to her hair, pulled and twisted it, eyes vague, lips curving dourly. She lifted: "It is sweet to hate . . . and hurt . . . and slay! It is . . . power! It is sweeter far to love . . . yet hurt . . . but withhold death from the beloved . . . for his anguish is constant assurance of that power! Now it may be that I should take myself many lovers . . . that their cries ring sweet in my ears. For in all the world . . . none has power like mine!"

Sick, he wondered that ever a part of her was Jean. Fien-wi, near the door, lifted sleeve to mask frightened face.

Then the fox-woman turned head sharply as though harking to a distant sound. She sniffed, shivered, head straining toward the door. Paul listened, heard nothing; dilated his nostrils and inhaled. There was no odor. But then—she was fox, more sensitive than he—

"What is it?" he asked.

"I smell danger—the sweat of horses! I hear footsteps—"

She straightened almost with a snap, cried to the brown woman in her own tongue, translated to Paul: "Quickly—to the *tanka!* Meredith comes armed against me!"

She scuttered to him, caught and tugged him. He did not move swiftly enough; she went behind him, pushing.

Fien-wi was already at the painting. The fox-woman bobbed in hasty bow to the gods in its corners. Then made before each of them a peculiar sign, like the twisting of an invisible key.

Paul heard the grumble of male voices from the hall. So did the fox-woman, looking over a shoulder. She thrust out a hand—but the painting did not shimmer as if pigment had become airy. There was no suggestion of distance! It remained itself, merely a picture.

The fox-woman turned, back flat against it. "Caught!" she whimpered—voice curiously like a whining dog's. "Great my power—but over men, not their beasts! Meredith has made use of counter-magic!"

There was no need for her to cry command to Fien-wi—the brown woman already had moved to an inner room for weapon. Nor need for her to warn Paul. The door—he must lock it, gain them at least a little time! For if Meredith was coming equipped against the fox-woman, he would be prepared also to cope with her friends. And if he hated her—still, because of Jean—he was unwilling friend.

He was barely into the antechamber when the hall door was flung open and Meredith strode in, very brave with a gun. Behind him was a motley band—how many men, Paul could not see, for some murmured from the hall. He guessed a dozen.

They were mainly Orientals, all singularly well-dressed in American fashion. One was a feline Hindu, another a chunky pimple-faced Japanese; there were several whites, rugged-faced, hard-jawed and with the small quick eyes of born fighters. All held guns, though some with the odd suggestion that they aimed toward Meredith.

It seemed that in the short minutes since Paul had seen Meredith last, the man had gained weight—the mournful folds of skin which had made his face like a sad beagle's were less noticeable now. He carried himself exaggeratedly straight. And his usually thin voice rang sonorously:

"All right, young Lascelles—put up your hands—get over to the side!" No chance to dive for him, catch him for hostage. He called beyond Paul: "Ho, there, fox! Come out—or by God, I'll come and drag you out!"

For all his bravado he nodded to the men behind himself, sending them ahead. Three pounced on Paul. Three others crept to the inner doorways. One gingerly toed a screen farther to the wall that they might enter abreast.

There were sounds of scuffle from the blue-walled chamber, the shrill shrieks of women. Meredith rocked on tiptoe, straining to see over the combatants. Momentarily Paul felt sympathy for the fox-woman.

A shout from the blue room brought more men to it. Soon they emerged, two of them grasping Fien-wi's arms, almost carrying her as she

squirmed and leaped in their hold. Three others dragged the fox-woman—she was pulling back, feet braced, digging into the carpet and piling it corrugated under her toes. She tripped. They had her!

Attention was on her for the moment. Paul bent knees, dropped into a squat and shot backward in quick spring, striking down the gun of one of his captors, twisting another around in complete pirouette, pulling him off balance; he seized the gun, held the man to his chest as shield. Rammed the gun's muzzle into the man's kidney, retreated to the wall. The other two stopped attack, seeing their comrade threatened.

Paul began to edge his prisoner toward Fien-wi. She seemed docile enough now. Her captors, reassured by that docility, slightly relaxed their grip. Instantly she swung from one side to the other, wresting arms free, caught a dagger from under her sash and hurled it at Meredith! It flashed like a miniature thunderbolt, sang past his head.

The man in Paul's arms went limp, tumbled flat on the floor; at once the other two leaped over him at Paul. It seemed his gun was alive; it hopped in his grasp, snapping fire. One assailant stiffened, dived backwards, lay kicking and rolling. The other clutched Paul's knees, toppling him. As he tumbled the gun cracked twice. On the floor, desperately fending his foe's attack, he heard a surprised yell from Meredith, hoped he had hit him.

Others piled on him. In a few seconds he was hauled to his feet, hands twisted helpless behind his back—even as it had gone with Fien-wi and the fox-woman. The three captives were ranged side by side. Now Paul saw that there was indeed a dozen or more men backing Meredith. The others had pressed in from the hall.

Meredith triumphed over the three, licking loose lips, aquiline nose become a condor's beak. He sneered at Paul, grinned wickedly at Fien-wi; paused long before the fox-woman, who was trembling like a whipped cur. Deliberately he spat on her—

"Stop, Meredith!"

Now whose voice was that? He turned to it—

A Chinese stood in the doorway. Like many Celestials he did not show his age, seemed about forty; was taller than the average of his race and handsome. From chin down he was pure fashion plate, well-cut business suit hanging from him without fold or spot of lint—as though his was a human head on a clothier's window-manikin.

He said, his voice carrying so clearly that it had the effect of a shout: "I warned you—no shooting! And do not strike the lady, Meredith. She is not yet yours to abuse. Not until I am given my son."

His son? Then this must be—Li-kong!

Meredith grumbled, reluctantly stepped from the fox-woman. His eyes did to her what he dared not do with his hands. She snarled back at him, froth on her lips.

Unhurriedly Li-kong paced to her; plucked the creases of his trousers at mid-thigh and kneeled, touched his forehead to the floor. He spoke in Chinese, voice hushed, reverent. Her eyes opened from slits, wrathful fires dying away. She studied him with interest, even put to him a question. And smiled slyly at its answer.

Meredith choked: "Damn you, Li-kong—you're supposed to be on my side, not hers! Whatever you have to say—make it in English!"

Li-kong did not heed him, went on with speech to the woman. He finished, kissed the carpet just before her feet and arose. She no longer trembled, was as serene as if no danger menaced her, sent to Paul and Fien-wi a glance which she meant for reassurance as to their safety—but it failed its purpose. Its promise was cruel. For the present they were inviolate, she thought she was saying—but the cold triumph added that, so long as she lived, they would never be free of her.

Meredith and Li-kong stood face to face. Meredith was sputtering in attempt to voice furious protest. Li-kong said curtly: "Waste no time, Meredith. I have the fox and her friends. Now give me my son."

Meredith fumed: "What were you saying to her in your heathen tongue? What did you promise her?" Li-kong was silent, eyes hard. Meredith said: "I knew you couldn't be trusted, Li-kong. I knew you'd resent what I've done. But I had to drag you into this mess—"

Li-kong cut him short. "You had to save your wrinkled hide. I know!" His voice lowered, shook with threat: "Where is my son?"

He signalled—it was but the stirring of one finger. Two men sidled to Meredith, caught his hands, pulled them behind him. Like Paul and the women, he was captive.

He laughed! His warders jerked his hands higher, changing laughter to a groan. For a moment they held him so, then brought his hands down. Sweating, Meredith grunted: "Don't have them do it again, Li-kong. It won't help you—I told you I didn't trust you—"

Li-kong nodded. The men released Meredith, slipped back from him.

Meredith said: "Your son is on my California ranch, under close guard. If any but myself comes for him—he will be shot!"

He dulled the speculation in Li-kong's quick glance toward the fox-woman. "Fox-magic can't prevail there! I've had horses brought to the place, and dogs—used all the information you so belatedly sent me. You can't punish me for involving you in this, Li-kong, then use the fox to help free your son." Pleased at his cleverness, he smirked, curving the channels from nostrils to mouth-corners. "I remembered your attitude at our last meeting. I thought something like this might arise!"

He posed at ease, as befitted a master of the situation. "I've arranged it so that your son dies at any sign of attack on the ranch. You shan't have him unless you deliver the fox, her servant and her lover to me at the ranch's gates. Understand?"

Li-kong answered: "Perfectly." Then, bitterly: "You are in every respect as I remember you." From his tone he implied that greater insult was inconceivable. "It shall be as you wish. I bow to you. Now exactly where is this ranch? Without delay we go there."

Meredith, contemplating the fox-woman, nodded whole-heartedly. "Without delay!"

They parleyed, made plans—they would take there was not room enough for the whole party, the next cross-country plane to Los Angeles. If Meredith would leave first, under guard, and they would meet him later. Li-kong had friends in Los

Angeles—indeed, had chosen there some of these very men.

There would be no trouble with the captives. They would drink of a potent drug Li-kong carried on himself; would appear to be tipsy and would sleep through most of the journey.

Li-kong's men ransacked the house for whatever pleased them. Meredith fumed. Li-kong said: "The cat snarls at the other cats, though they rescue it from the dog. Think, Meredith—you have your millions still, once this matter is resolved. Let them take what they will—you can replace it!"

But he forbade their touching the fox-woman's property, gathered it from them and with his own hands restored it to her. And permitted her telling of Fien-wi those articles she would need on the trip. Under guard, the brown woman packed them.

Li-kong took from breast pocket a slim bottle of dark glass, poured a drop into each of three tumblers; filled them with water, watched it dusken to dull red.

He said to Paul: "Drink. It is only sleep, not death."

He spoke to the fox-woman in Chinese. She lifted her tumbler, whispered to Fien-wi. The brown woman sipped.

The mixture was tasteless. Li-kong said: "Make yourselves comfortable in the living room." Nor unkindly: "The wise rat, finding it cannot gnaw to freedom, sleeps and gathers strength until the box is opened. Then it can fight."

He posted a guard over each of them. It was not necessary. Already Paul felt heavy, as though his blood were mercury; he held eyes open with effort. The Chinese handed him a number of newspapers. "These might interest you—while you wait."

On the front page of the first of them, a headline roared:

MURDER IN MANHATTAN MUSEUM

Vandals Slay Woman, Swap Art Treasures

Secret Cult's Rites Hinted in Death

Guards of the Manhattan Museum of Art discovered the literally pulped body of an unidentified woman in the Museum's Grecian Wing this morning while making their rounds preparatory to the daily opening of the museum to the public.

It was found that many ancient and priceless sculptures have disappeared, and equally ancient but hitherto unknown sculptures substituted in their places and distributed variously throughout the museum.

How either woman or vandals entered the building is unknown. Since forced entry is impossible into the edifice, which is completely equipped with burglar-alarms, and each section is nightly closed off from the main hall, police took into custody the three night-watchmen, John Morrison, 97-60 Burton Road, Forest Hills, L. I.; Louis Semple, 321 West 105th Street, Manhattan; and August Devries, 4510 Cropsey Avenue, Brooklyn. All three denied any connection with, or knowledge of, the crime.

The woman, a bleached blonde of uncertain years, was clad in a white taffeta housecoat and wore matching mules. Her face was beaten to featureless mash. Her identity may be established by tracing the jewelry she was wearing. The body was taken to the morgue in the hope that some visitor there might recognize it.

Of singular interest was the shrivelled hand of a mummy found not far from the corpse, its fingers charred as though it had been thrown into a fire but removed before more than slightly damaged.

Police and museum officials are puzzled as to the means by which the sculptures were transported, the lightest of them weighing well over two tons. None of the museum's own equipment for such purposes has been disturbed, as was proven by accumulated dust on it.

Among the missing treasures are a marble frieze from the pediments of the Parthenon; the famed Aphrodite of Sunium, artist unknown; and a faun of the school of Phidias, all dating back to the 5th Century, B. C. Missing also were later-period statues of the two Heroes of Corinth, the athlete by Lysippos and a nymph attributed to Praxiteles, reputedly a portrait of his mistress, Phryne.

Taken also are plaster copies of the Victory of Samothrace, the original of which is in the Louvre; the Laocoön group; and a relief of girl musicians. These are worthless to the thieves since they can be duplicated at low cost.

Replacing the frieze of horsemen is a similar one, but with several of its steeds and riders upside down. Dr. Edouard Amilcare, assistant curator of the museum, an internationally recognized authority on Greek antiquities, stated that the substituted piece is indubitably authentic, but unknown in the art world until now.

He produced photographs of the missing frieze from the museum's files, which when compared to the present one show that the nicked and broken edges of both are identical. The cracks and breaks among the figures themselves, which correspond in number, are duplicated as though both sculptures used as models maimed and scarred horses and men.

"It's as if," the assistant curator stated, "the sculptures in both cases are the same, but the riders have changed positions by supernatural means."

The plaster frieze of girl musicians has been supplanted by an almost-duplicate in which the positions of the figures are slightly altered.

Dr. Amilcare observed that the work involved in shifting and substituting statues normally requires at least a week. "Yet it happened in one night," he commented. "That means that an unusual number of workmen were employed. It is peculiar that none saw the thieves' trucks approach or leave the museum."

Savage irony pervades the array of murder, thefts and perplexing substitutions. Though the Lysippos athlete was taken, its pedestal and base were left behind, the figure having

been chiseled from it. On the floor near the pedestal was another athlete of similar proportions and aspect, but in different pose.

It was spotted by the woman's blood as though her killers, whether obeying insane impulse or observing pagan ritual, had painted it with blood.

Presence of the mummified hand close to the body further indicates the murder motive as being superstitious in nature.

Questioned about the authenticity of the blood smeared athlete, Dr. Amilcare remarked that it corresponded very much to one in the Vatican. "But I still don't see," he added, "how it could have been moved here!"

The faun was also hewn from its base. Its replacement was found upstairs in section F of the picture-galleries, where paintings by 19th Century French Masters are on view. Of the same size as the stolen one, but crouching and blowing into its pipes, it was discovered facing Corot's "Dance of the Nymphs" as if placed there with malicious humor.

In the same room were two helmeted marble warriors, a bearded plaster man like the central Laocoön figure, and a plaster boy, all without bases and remarkably balanced in the sprightly attitudes of a dance.

Dr. Amilcare said, "As far as I can tell without taking measurements or comparing this faun to the base of the lost one, both might have been carved from the same block of marble."

He added, "Ridiculous as it sounds, I have the uncanny feeling that all the pieces are the originals miraculously rendered plastic, arranged in different postures, and hardened again."

He called to attention the fact that the crystalline structure of the substitute faun would bear up under this hypothesis. "Otherwise," he averred, "it is carved from a peculiar type of knotty marble, which strikes me as more fantastic than the alternating theory."

Of interest also was the fact that the vandals had bleached the paintings off an ancient amphora and painted similar figures on the tiled floor.

Among other oddities is the finding, in the Etruscan exhibits, a plaster boy wearing a marble helmet and wielding a marble sword against the bronze copy of the Capitoline Wolf.

Someone wondered whether the doctor believes in statues coming to life at midnight, like dolls in the old fairy tales.

"No," he replied seriously, "but I do believe that there is grim purpose underlying the crime. There is a savagely superstitious element in the murder. The entire affair must have been perpetrated by fanatics determined on esoteric effects. It leaves one with the feeling of having experienced a sinister dream though wide awake. And it just can't have happened—yet it has."

It was a much more thorough account than Paul had heard over the radio. The implications in a boxed feature were terrifying:

The Manhattan Museum has been scene of

other thefts and of wanton murder. Ten years ago, three Rembrandt drawings disappeared, subsequently turning up in a second-hand store on the Bowery where the thief, never apprehended, had sold them at a dollar apiece. A year later, a small painting of Eve by Lucas Cranach was removed from its frame. It has not been recovered.

More recently a jeweled collar, over six thousand years old, dating from the predynastic reign of the Egyptian king Uatch-nar, vanished from its case during the night. Fragments of it were found, set in rings, in a Greenwich Village jewelry shop whose proprietor was sentenced along with a museum guard to a ten-year term.

In August 1924 in the Chinese rooms, a museum attendant, James Mannerling, brutally butchered with a hatchet a young Chinese art student, Doris Chou. To the moment of his execution, Mannerling protested innocence, clinging to his preposterous story that the girl had dropped already dying into the room as if from thin air. He demanded that the murder weapon be produced. It was not found.

The museum will be closed to the public until such time as it is restored to order.

Paul wondered: *God—was Mannerling actually innocent, and the girl thrown into the museum through the shen painting there? And the Egyptian collar—and the other stolen works—*

Well, at least the fox-woman wasn't responsible for the Chou girl's death—it happened before she was born!

The paper was heavy in his hand . . . as if its leaves were metal and thickening . . .

Are the tankas known only to the foxes? If so—there are more in the country than this one woman! Or is the secret shared by other practitioners of the dark arts?

For periodically, he knew, the police uncovered strange murder cults—the Satanists of twenty years ago in the Bronx, the Black Widow killers in Brooklyn with their magic potions . . . inept sorcerers they, if the police could take them! But what about the cults of which the known ones were but hint?

God, he was sleepy! He felt himself relaxing, slumping down in his chair.

In any case, it's a good thing the tankas are uncommon . . . not too many of them scattered about.

And now he was asleep, but for the first time in his life conscious of it. He thought a hand patted him and that he heard a soothing whisper in unknown tongue . . . perhaps he dreamed of Fien-wi? And again lips he knew and hated . . . yet craved in spite of himself . . . touched his . . . the fox-woman's kiss . . .

He was walking, he could not see where . . . Walking in his sleep! What was this drone like the roar of a cyclone?

Curious dream! For now he was undressing himself as though going to bed . . . he bumped something without pain . . . lay to sleep . . . slumber within slumber . . . dream within dream.

Walking again . . . the slam it seemed of an automobile's door . . . He was floating irregularly, as though riding a bucking cloud . . . that was an amusing fancy: *I wonder if they use clouds for*

horses in Heaven, and who breaks the wild ones?

Loud clapping sounds, like hoofbeats . . . his cheeks burned as if scorched. He heard a voice: "Open your eyes!" It would have been more agreeable just to sleep, but he stirred. Caught Li-kong's murmur: "He is awake."

He blinked, dazzled by the light. Somehow he had been transported from Meredith's house to the black seat of an automobile, Li-kong on his right and a Lascar on his left. Through the windows he saw wooded hillside slipping past, a pool of blue sky with a glint of pearl—a snow-capped mountain.

The Lascar's hand was lifted to slap him further. Li-kong motioned to the man. "Let be!" Then to Paul: "Sit straight."

He gathered himself erect, suddenly aware of all the effects of a hangover—heaviness of limbs, fuzzy echoes shuttling in his ears and a brain fastened in his skull by an elastic band, and snapping with a thump against his skull if he so much as turned his eyes. The after-effects of Li-kong's drug.

Meredith was between the two men on the car's front seat.

"We approach the ranch," Li-kong explained. "It is best that you are awake." He glanced through the rear window to flying dust. "The others follow."

The one white-topped peak had unfolded into a whole range of others. Their gleaming summits lay like a chain of pearls on the sky's blue bosom. They slipped from sight as the car wheeled around a turn. Naked cliff screened them. Paul said: "We're approaching the ranch? You mean—we're in California?"

Li-kong nodded. "Three of my men and the most illustrious Meredith brought you by airplane. I followed in a second ship, the others with me." His eyes flicked Meredith's back as though he preferred not to name the fox-woman in the man's presence.

"How—how long was I asleep?" Paul asked.

"Almost thirty-six hours. We arrived in Los Angeles this morning and have been motoring ever since." Li-kong slid back his sleeve, consulted the unostentatious but expensive watch on his wrist. "It is a little past three in the afternoon—the Hour of the Hare."

"When will we reach the ranch?" Paul asked.

Meredith called exultant answer: "Sometime around six—the Hour of the Horse!"

XX

THE road labored up the hills, weaving from one side to another like the trail of a gigantic scythe. The verdure thinned to sparse clumps, mostly bare twigs jutting from the mist-garlanded cliffs as they passed the timberline. They snuggled deeper in their coats. The car plunged into a sluggishly rolling wall of grey cloud, went slowly as though feeling its way, emerged into a patch

of incandescent sunshine among snowy hillocks like the white tents of camping giants. Serpents of cloud crawled over the snow, leaving evanescent tracks of shadow. They cut through a pass whose walls, twenty feet apart, rose sheer hundreds of feet—as though one of the Titanic campers had cleaved the stone with a pick.

They poised on the brink of a downward grade, looked over dark foothills to a plain far below, specked in its center with buildings snowflake-bright. For an instant a blue spark gleamed from a rise beyond them, brief and gemlike as the flash of a kingfisher's wing.

From the front seat Meredith said, breath streaming with cold: "The ranch."

The road swung down. They descended from snow to sterile rock, to forests of yellow pine, hemlock and weeping spruce. It was warmer; they opened their coats. The car lifted and lowered over the summits of the diminishing foothills green with aspen, wax-myrtle and button-bush. Now it was hot; they removed coats entirely. As they reached the valley's comparatively level ground, the air was sharp with the medicinal tang of eucalyptus, the spice of mesquite.

Li-kong anxiously turned back toward the car behind them. Paul, hangover sensations considerably lightened, also peered backward. The second car was far behind them, only a black speck and an occasional gleam. Li-kong nodded, well satisfied, straightened around.

The valley's floor was less flat than it had appeared from above, was a succession of rolling meadows, an occasional hill. The road cut through wire-fenced fields of dry brown grass and bug-bush where herds of horses grazed or gathered about the cubic mounds of hay evidently left for them. A dapple-grey with the lines of a borzoi nickered at the car, tossed mane and cantered along the fence as if in escort. Windbreaks of valley oak and black myrtle walled the fields.

New York had been cold with late Spring; here, so much farther south, tropic Summer was under way.

Now the ranch buildings were again in sight, shaded by a grove of eucalyptus. Thatch-roofed, they were not so brilliantly white as when seen from afar, their stucco yellowish. Paul glimpsed the dwelling itself; a paddock, an ice-house with a minor mountain of sawdust beside it, a barn and a root house.

The road curved, now paralleling a clay wall. Atop this barrier an unkempt man was seated, half hidden by a clump of yucca spires; the sun flashed from the barrel of the rifle he held. He waved as the car passed, flourished his rifle to a point farther ahead as if wig-wagging a signal.

The wall ran perhaps a mile. Other men were posted on it. The high grilled gate came into sight. Yapping dogs raced from it—droop-jowled beagles like oversized rats, spotted fox hounds, several coppery Irish setters and a wolfish police dog. As dogs met car the driver cursed and cut speed; the animals stood in the way, barking, only reluctantly giving ground; leaped to the running boards and panted in chase.

Now the Lascar beside Paul leaned forward, lifted a gun to Meredith's head. The car barely crawled to the gate, stopped. Meredith felt the gun, turned.

"You needn't do that," he said unperturbed. "I

won't double-cross you."

Li-kong answered him with grim tightening of mouth, looked back. The second car was nearing; decelerated as the dogs rushed to greet it; pulled up beside Li-kong's vehicle. Within it Paul saw four of Li-kong's men, guns held in readiness for the least suspicion of attack. In the front seat was Fien-wi, the fox-woman in the back.

Since his awakening there had been no chance for escape; there was none now. He could do nothing to benefit the women or himself.

A half-dozen men were coming from the gate, a few with rifles, the others with pistols raised.

Li-kong began, husky-voiced: "Command them to—"

But Meredith anticipated him, shouted urgently: "Stop!"

They halted, craned, squinting against the sun. They recognized Meredith. Their faces were as nondescript as their clothing; they looked like the dregs of a skidrow settlement. One spat luxuriously in the dust, asked: "What say, Boss?"

Li-kong leaned from his window, called: "Do nothing rash! Meredith is covered with a gun. At first sign of a false move—we shoot him, then take our chances."

"Jees, a Chink," one of the six observed. Another added: "Yeah, educated-like."

Li-kong continued: "We are sending three people through your gate—this man beside me and the two women in the next vehicle. Take them where you will. When my son has come to that car," he nodded toward the one in which were the women, "and is inside it—then and only then we will release Meredith to you."

He pulled back as a dog leaped for his face, snapped: "It will lessen the tension if you call off the dogs."

A squat dark man asked: "*Verdad, padrón?*"

Vigourously Meredith tossed acquiescent head. "Right."

The dark man whistled. Several dogs scurried to him; others lifted ears, wagged tails. A few, nosing the wheels of the cars, paid no heed. He whistled again, lost patience, swiftly unwound the lash he wore as belt, pushed the nearer beasts aside and snapped the recalcitrant ones on the flanks. They cringed whimpering. He started away, calling: "*Ven comer—es tiempo para comer*—come and eat!"

Most of them chased after him through the gate, barking and jumping. A few lingered, then pricked ears to the eager whines of the others, hastily joined them. The dogs were gone.

Li-kong stared long at Paul as if puzzling a mystery. At last he said sympathetically: "On the lap of the God of Wealth sits a rat—fit symbol for the cowardly brother-killer! I am not in sympathy with his purpose—to end the fox-woman, her servant and yourself. I am here only to claim my son. You and the women are here to be slain. Therefore keep your wits about you."

Paul snorted anger: "You advise me—then abandon us!"

Unruffled, Li-kong went on: "This place is protected by threefold charm. Yes, I instructed Meredith how to prepare the charm. Understand, it is because my son means much to me. Against you and especially against the fox, I have no rancor. But I love my son. Horses and dogs are here; soon will come the Hour of the Horse; Meredith's

men will sprinkle the fox with distilled water, drawing her power from her. Protect her with your life!" With special emphasis, he added: "Who knows—the lightning that strikes the tree may uncover the miser's hoard at its roots!"

Paul clenched fists at Meredith's jubilant grin, said: "Heaven may protect us—but you won't. Don't bother with justifying yourself, Li-kong. Send us out and get it over."

Li-kong sighed, said mournfully: "It is well for the hunted deer to heed every sound in the underbrush if it would live." Then brusquely: "Get out! You will have to climb past me." He pressed back from Paul's way.

It was hot enough in the car with the sun's heat firing the roof; on the road it was stifling. Paul stood uncertain a moment. Li-kong slammed the door. Fien-wi and the fox-woman were stepping from their vehicle; they joined him. The brown woman was calm; the other smiling vacantly. She stood as if her muscles had withered and could not stir.

One moment he scanned both cars. If only he could win possession of one, speed the women and himself to safety! Even though he managed to avoid the gunplay of Li-kong's men, Meredith's would have him.

One of the fox-woman's arms he took, Fien-wi the other. They walked her through the gate. Meredith's men stepped a little aside to let them pass, grinning at Paul with obscene understanding. They barely considered Fien-wi, but they gloated on the fox-woman. Then at sight of her bleak smile the gloating faded; they turned away uneasily.

The horses in the fields had indicated that Meredith was taking no chances with fox-magic, despite whatever amulet he wore to protect his person. Nor did he trust Li-kong, for there were ten or twelve more men, well-armed and hidden behind the wall.

Three slipped from cover, took charge of the hostages, led them from the drive to a spot screened by tall fireweed, there halted them. A fourth and fifth took circuitous route to the house, returned with a yellow-skinned stripling in soiled and rumpled clothing, his hands bound at his back. Paul discerned in him a youthful copy of Li-kong. He was taken through the gate.

From the fireweed's lattice Paul perceived Li-kong motion the youth to the car from which the women had disembarked, saw the boy helped into it. Li-kong transferred to that car, sat by his son, greeted him by caressing his cheek with a quick half-ashamed touch. The motor whirled. The car backed, swerved, started away toward the mountains, dust hanging in its wake.

The dust had settled before Meredith came from the remaining machine. He watched while it wheeled around and followed the first. Fastidiously he brushed his clothing, straightened. He and his men approached the fireweed brake.

The fox-woman was still dazedly smiling and trembling. Meredith strode jauntily to her, struck her face with the back of a hand. Her smile persisted, but from her throat throbbed a growl. He laughed. "Snarl away, fox! You've short time for it!"

Few of his men took up his laughter. Mostly they were crowded away, none too sure of themselves. Not as yet. But from their shifty eyes, from

the latent whine in their muttering voices, Paul judged them beasts of the pack, timorous until sufficiently aroused by the smell of blood and the example of their leader.

Meredith's knuckles caught Paul across the teeth. The man sneered at Fien-wi, returned attention to the fox-woman. "Got you—all three of you! Well—what have you to say for yourselves?"

If he wished her to plead for mercy, he was fated for disappointment. Had the desire been within her, in her present state she was unable to gratify it. He eyed his watch. "Ten minutes to six—the Hour of the Horse! Better speak while you're able, Yin Hu—fox, niece—whoever and whatever you are!"

Still she smiled, red finger marks on cheeks, eyes dreaming on his. And still she trembled. He darkened with quick wrath. "By God, I'll make you talk—if I have to turn the dogs on you!" he stormed.

She crumpled as if her bones had turned liquid. He gaped, toed her. Plainly he had overshot his mark. He said to the nearest man, "Jorge—carry her to the corral. Murphy, bring the water. We'll wake her up—or keep her safe until she awakens by herself." And as though thinking: "She'll not cheat me of what I've planned!"

As one man bore the fox-woman in arms and others herded Paul and Fien-wi after him. Meredith walked beside the limp woman, muttering though she could not hear: "Maybe you'll scream to me for mercy—me, for a change! Maybe you'll bargain with me now—fox! You'll never hurt me—never again! I could let you live as my slave, now that I'm wearing the amulet Li-kong gave me. You could conquer the world for me, never touching me—I could kill you if ever you got in my way—"

Something of his tone began to stir his men. Their interplay of murmurs loudened, reflected his savagery. They took a path past the ice-house, the garage, to a rail-fenced enclosure behind the paddock—the corral. Its loose dirt was marked by the unshod hoofs which had hoed it. Meredith barked directions; many men scattered. Of one remaining he asked: "Li-kong's out of the valley?"

"I'll see, Boss." The man ran to the gate, soon returned with company. "The Chink's cars are climbin' the hill, Boss. He ain't comin' back."

It seemed to Paul as Jorge laid the fox-woman down that while senseless and with no trace of mad thought distorting her face, she was lovely. Not quite Jean, nor Yin Hu, still the composite of both. Small and dainty, lithe of line—fragilely lovely indeed.

If only—! He thought it sadly: *If only—!*

So must the Mexican have thought, chafing her hands. He looked up, asked: "You sure you want doing this, *padrón?*"

"You're getting paid—but not for asking questions!" Meredith snapped. As if the reference to money were magic, Jorge became less a man—seemed to have sipped the golden wine of Circe.

Murphy brought a flask of brilliantly refractive water, knelt beside Jorge. He uncapped the bottle, sprinkled drops on the fox-woman. She sighed, eyelids fluttering. Moaned. Jorge ungently helped her up to sitting posture, roughness overbalancing the skulking thought of kindness of a moment before.

Meredith consulted his timepiece again. "Past

six! Well, fox—what do you say? Shall we rule the world together, h'm?" He stamped angrily. "Perhaps you'd like your lover to go first—or your servant—maybe then you'll get the picture of what's coming for you! Maybe then you'll talk!"

Paul pulled against the hands holding him, was forced to immobility. Thought: *These men listen to nothing but the call of money—my arguments would never get beyond a few words before they'd silence me! But I've got to do something—if I fail, all they can do is kill me! But that would leave the women helpless—*

Meredith cut in on his speculation, crying callously: "Oh, hell—let 'em all go at once! The horses! Jaunillo—the dogs!"

Paul gasped: "Meredith—man, what are you going to do with us?"

"Let the horses trample her—and her servant and you. Let the dogs tear her!" He added grimly: "It's the only way. If I shot her, I'd kill only her human side. The fox would be freed from her body and I'd still have to cope with it."

He rubbed palms briskly: "Both parts of her die now—at once—together!" And while Paul grasped this, he said: "The servant goes because she's part fox. You go so you can't blab! Are you satisfied?"

"But for God's sake, Meredith!"

"For my sake!" Meredith blazed. "This is one time when I've got to think of myself!"

The men had collected again, those from the wall with them. In all, about thirty. They seized the women and Paul, hustled them stumbling to the corral's long gate, shoved them within. They climbed the fence, mounting guard, sat hunched expectantly on the rail, yelling to each other, excitedly making bets—precisely as a crowd of cowhands at a rodeo. Meredith had chosen them well. Iron-faced killers all of them. Whatever they felt—it was not mercy nor pity.

From the paddock half a dozen ranch hands came with the horses. Of all kinds from pinto mustang and Arabian black to giant Percheron, those horses were. Some trotted along docilely enough; others reared. One halted, pawing the ground and snorting.

The dogs rushed in a body from around the paddock's corner, barking and leaping; sprang with wagging tails to those who called them. They nipped playfully at the horses, chased each other. A few slipped between the corral rails, started amiably enough for Paul and the women, then halted, suspiciously sniffing. Some backed away; others stood their ground, bristling, heads down, snarling. One threw itself on hind feet, howling; turned and raced away over the far fields.

Fien-wi was clinging to the fox-woman, arms wrapped around her to shield her, terror in her eyes. The fox-woman did not respond to that embrace. Her smile was fading, fear and a certain realization taking its place. Realization and fear were not sane—no! Her visage reflected the dog's mounting animosity as if it were a mirror. Her upper lip curled in silent snarl, her body tensed until she had slipped from the brown woman's hold, was stooping. She placed herself on fingertips and toes as Wilde had done. Her hair had fallen unknotted. Froth flecked her lips.

The first of the horses, a white, reached the gate, stopped short, whinnying. The man with the lash snapped at it, urging it on. It plunged into the arena, plowed hoofs in the ground to an abrupt

halt, pivoted and raced around the rail. The spectators backed away as it passed them, one losing balance and tumbling backward into the dust. The others howled laughter at this mishap, shouted unintelligibly, their faces less human, as if simultaneously with the fox-woman they reverted to the bestial.

A strawberry roan and a pinto hurtled into the corral. The roan stopped as abruptly as had the white. The pinto collided against it, slipped off balance and fell, lay a moment kicking and snorting. It clambered upright, raced straight for the three! Paul knocked the women aside, sprang in oblique leap, fell almost under the roan's stamping hoofs. He rolled from their menace into the path of the charging white, defensively kicked up at it. The white pulled up short, twisted away, missing him, hoof gouging the roan's ribs, drawing blood.

At scent of that blood he white screamed and attacked the roan! They towered on hind feet, front legs flailing, heads snaking to bite. Paul backed from them, tumbled over Fien-wi, her eyes closed tightly as she cowered beside the whimpering fox. The dogs were yapping, poised restless behind the rail.

The pinto was sidling toward the women. The fox unwittingly saved herself by striking at Fien-wi; the flash of her torn sleeve sent the pinto wheeling aside. He cracked against a section of fence, broke it, tumbled down among flying splinters and dislodged men; writhed among them in cloud of dust. The dogs scuttled around the enclosure, snapping impartially at men and horse, became engaged in combat among themselves. Others forgot their fear of the fox and cut through the corral, adding to the confusion. The men not shaken from their places shouted, but offered no aid.

Paul tore the ravening fox-woman loose from Fien-wi, hurled her toward the fence. She rolled almost under it. He caught Fien-wi's wrist, dragged her full-length through the dust toward what he thought might be safety. Once at the rail, his back to the men, he could withstand attack from the fore—but he had not reckoned on the rules of the contest! Already men were down and kicking the fox-woman back from the rail, urging the dogs on her. Blood-mad as all the rest was the one called Jorge. Hoarsely he was roaring: "*Matelá! Matelá! Kill her!*"

A dog jumped Paul, sank burning teeth into the forearm he protectively raised to his face. He whirled, jerking it from its feet. It hung as if hooked to him! Another leaped, tore his coat, fell away with strip of cloth in its jaws.

Paul tumbled deliberately down on the cur, caught its middle between his knees. Sweating, teeth gritted with agony, he forced his arm backward . . . and down . . . fresh fire licking to the very bone. The cur's jaws lost grip. He grasped it by the neck, sprang up lifting it, hurled it straight up to the craning men. They fell back from their posts, borne down by the struggling body, raged as it shifted its attack to them.

He heard the brown woman's shriek! The dog which had torn his coat had sunk fangs into Fien-wi's shoulder. And others were weaving toward them . . .

Behind other faces he saw Meredith's, all riotous hell flaming on it. Heedless of all else he lunged for the man, butted those who pressed in

the way, seeking to wedge himself through and to Meredith.

By God, I'll get him if it's the last thing I ever do!

He was thrown back; leaping dogs dragged him down. He could not reach the one worrying his thigh; kicked futilely, hands protecting his throat from another. Subconsciously as he twisted and tossed he heard the sound of shots, of yells louder than ever before; was too occupied to wonder at them.

Shots and cries were closer—he glimpsed beyond the hound's snapping teeth, men falling and leaping from the fence. One rebounded against him, heel striking Paul's cheek, body flattening the dog. Paul curled, snatched the other cur by the nape, striving to work its jaws loose from his leg. He twisted its tail; it yelped, flashed bloody muzzle toward his face. He fended it away.

The air was thick with smoke! It was raining sparks! The place was a bedlam. Men, dogs, horses packed together in the corral, reeling and tumbling—the horses beyond the enclosure screaming and stampeding, the men outside scattering for shelter—

Smoke bit Paul's nostrils and eyes. Temporarily blinded, sparks needling his cheeks, he staggered through the melee, buffeted this way and that as he searched for Fien-wi and the fox-woman. Tears cleared his vision. Meredith was bending over the fox-woman . . . he made for the man . . . a flailing fist swept from the confusion, caught him behind the ear, tumbled him forward upon Meredith who was raging to the fox: "—at least you'll die with me!"

Meredith's arms shot up, caught Paul. The two tripped over the fox-woman, Paul falling under a rail, Meredith over it. Smoke rippled between them like a veil sparkling with ruby sequins. Paul wriggled, felt for Meredith's legs, wrenched on one, tumbled the man beside him. He straddled him, hands on his throat—

Now damn you, I've got you!

Smoke and rippling heat blotted out the man's face. Meredith clawed Paul's torn arm. The sleeve pulled away. Meredith's fingers slipped on blood; he dug them into Paul's wound. They stung like the combined bite of a thousand bees. Paul loosed hold. Meredith caught the bar overhead, chinned himself frantically, shooting from under Paul, catapulting himself into the screening smoke. Before Paul could slip between the bars to catch him, Meredith was up, mingled with the rioters, gone.

Fien-wi, pajama coat ripped from shoulder to hem, blood lacquering brown breast, was tugging on the limp fox-woman. He sprang to her aid, seized the recumbent form, hoisted it over shoulder and reeled with it toward the gap in the fence, Fien-wi stumbling behind him. The corral was almost emptied now; horses, dogs and men were scattering. Smoke hid them from him. He came to a clear spot of air, paused.

The ragged curtains of smoke swept upward on a gust of shimmering heat. And that heat struck Paul like a fist, watering his eyes as he fell back from its force. A swift comber of flame roared down on the corral, splashing red spume of sparks. Pushed by the heat, burning tumbleweeds rolled past, balls of fire. Paul recalled the dry grass of the meadows, the bugbushes and the hay stacked

for the horses. Had Li-kong, fleeing, touched off the fire?

The corral with its clean dirt was the safest place just then. It was deserted, and what remained of the rail would keep out the leaping, screaming horses. He dropped the fox-woman in the arena, pulled Fien-wi down, huddled over them, waited. Flames leaped independently, high overhead, like blazing birds. They settled on the paddock, the buildings beyond. The heat was so intense that his nerves were paralysed to it; he felt it as ice.

It lessened. There was little grass around the enclosure; the flames circumvented it. The danger now was from smoke. He tore off his steaming coat, threw it over the heads of Fien-wi and fox-woman; stuffed handkerchief into mouth, wetting it with saliva, pressed it to his nose.

The flames had passed on; over smouldering ashes blackened horses shrilled and leaped and toppled, lay kicking or motionless. He saw the ranch house burning, the eucalyptus trees tremendous torches. The sawdust pile of the ice-house puffed up in sparks as though exploding, scattering clouds of sparks. The garage was a towering beacon; its gasoline drums detonated, jetting fire like rocket-bursts.

The paddock had been reduced to burning skeleton—a framework it seemed all of fire. Within it grotesque cinders shrieked piercingly, reeled and fell. The framework crumbled in on itself, geysering winking embers.

Farther passed the flames, far over the fields. Sensation of cold had ceased; he could feel his burns. Men were hurrying over the ashes from the gate. If they took him—at least he would give them good fight! He crouched to spring at them, involuntarily grunted as pain licked him with electric tongues. He had not known until now the extent of his hurts . . .

The men neared. Grime masked them, but he recognized them. Li-kong and his servants! And—Meredith!

I'll get that devil this time!

Two of Li-kong's men caught him as he sprang. He cursed futilely, strained panting in their hold. The Chinese whispered softly to Meredith: "White worm—if I find in this state the Daughter of Earth—I will complete her vengeance for her! I will cut out your eyes and stuff their sockets with embers! I will—"

Paul screamed: "Let me kill him, Li-kong! Let me get my hands on his damned throat! I'll do to him what you talk of doing—"

One of his captors shifted grasp, pressed hand over his mouth, crushing lips against teeth, a thumb under his chin, silencing him.

Fien-wi had dragged the coat from her head, struggled erect. Li-kong stooped over the fox-woman, black against the far fire belting the horizon, its smoke obliterating the snow peaks.

Clothed black and red in soot and blood perhaps not hers alone, the fox-woman stirred, opened eyes to the Chinese. He took her hands, pulled her to her feet. He dropped on knees, forehead to the ground. She gazed at him as though neither recognizing him nor the homage he gave. She scanned the others bewilderedly; turned toward the vanishing fires.

Li-kong, head still bent, said: "Is it not written that—when the wolf pursues—one may as well

ask aid of the tiger? When I learned that the pale devil held my son—I could not take side against the foxes! Therefore much as I feared Yu Ch'ien, I sent a messenger to him, asking counsel. He spoke with the gracious spirits your sisters. What they advised me to do, I have done! This place has been purged of all taint by fire, prepared for your final justice!"

She was gazing curiously on him as if seeking to unriddle his identity and presence.

The hand was taken from Paul's mouth; the muscles ached under his chin at removal of pressure there. His arm and thigh throbbed. Weakly, dizzily, he hung in the hold of his warders. His rage against Meredith had not diminished; he was simply no longer capable of combat.

Li-kong told the fox: "I deliver Meredith to you—and those left who aided him."

He swept out a pointing hand. There were men beside the ashes of the paddock. Blackened by smoke, all looked alike, save that some held hands in air while others stood vigil with guns.

Farther beyond, on a rise of ground once hidden behind the eucalyptus grove and now revealed through their leafless, fire-pruned limbs, a pathway ran from the ruined house. Charred poles of hemlock and pine guarded this path like black spears. Crowning the knoll was the wreckage of a tiered pagoda, part of its roof fallen in, its tiled walls, once blue, greyed by smoke to ash of ultramarine.

This, Paul realized, was what had sent the blue gleam he had seen while on the mountain road. He wondered how it came to be here—a Chinese temple on Meredith's land! The fox-woman's sudden murmur cleared up that point:

"The blue pagoda! Built long ago by my father on this ground when it was his; a replica of the Yunnan temple he loved so well! Jean Meredith heard of it from the foxes; Yin Hu heard of it from Yu Ch'ien. And both thought to come here. But I—who am neither Jean nor Yin Hu—I did not remember!"

The jade eyes glowed in the stained face, swung to Meredith. "Had I remembered, uncle mine—we would have been here long and long ago!"

Li-kong tilted back his head, lifted beseeching hands. "Worshipful one, dismiss me. Let me not witness what you will do. I have fulfilled the demands of Yu Ch'ien and the foxes—"

Meredith spat: "You damned yellow sneak—you sold me after all!"

Li-kong dropped hands, swerved head toward the man. "A promise made under duress is not binding! You dragged me into something beyond human ethics! Of what use to save my son at any price—if ever after the sisters of the fox were to hunt both him and myself to the death?"

He leaped up, marched to Meredith, pushed his face close to the other's. "What, I should keep oath with you—whose arrangements did not include saving your wife?"

Meredith heaved against the men grasping him, shrieked: "You'll not leave me to her! No, by God—I'll make you kill me first—"

They threw him down, two kneeling on his arms, two more on his legs. He beat head on the ground, sobbing. Li-kong spat on him. As much as his wounds hurt him, Paul laughed.

The fox-woman said, quite herself: "You serve me well, Li-kong. I have no blame for you. But

one thing remains. I can smell and hear and see that charm he wears in his clothing, over his heart—a charm against which I cannot prevail.”

If Fien-wi did not understand their speech, she knew the thought behind it. And now she made choice between fox and human, betrayed the fox for the girl she had nursed and loved. She would transfer the charm to Paul, freeing him from the fox! Quickly she hobbled to Meredith, unerringly found the amulet in his heart pocket, grasped it and backed away, face knotted with pain and disgust as though the thing were a live coal or worse.

None moved to intercept her, thinking she but anticipated the order of her mistress. She scurried to Paul, thrust the charm—it was like a small clod of ochreous clay—within his shirt, patted it secure. Then folded arms across breast, returning the fox-woman's stare stonily.

Her mistress laughed. “What use, Fien-wi—when Li-kong will remove the token?” Again the brown woman caught the thought rather than the words. She had not thought of it! She flashed before Paul, her back to him, walling him from the fox-woman, muttering over her shoulder, imploring him to run. He could not; the men still held him. Had they released him, still he must stay—he could barely stand.

Li-kong was startled by this new development. He studied the brown woman and Paul. He said: “I did not know! I thought you were her lover!” And to the fox-woman: “Is not the heart as a bird in the body's cage? When the bird has flown, what use to cherish the empty wires? Let me take him—”

She jutted her chin, answered in cold monotone: “He is indeed my lover—and who takes him must plead for compassion! He remains! Nor shall you leave, Li-kong, until you remove the token from him!”

He reined his misgivings. Bowed to her complaisantly. Said politely, apologetically to Paul: “There is no other course open. Permit me—” Probed fingers into Paul's shirt and took from it the talisman.

The fox-woman brooded on Fien-wi with narrowed eyes, breathed deadly promise in alien tongue. To Li-kong she said: “It is well. We are quits. The amulet you may keep; you have earned it, and one day you may need it. The day”, she flung head high, “when I take the world for mine!”

She pointed by staring toward the far gateway: “Now go—and quickly—for death walks in my footsteps!”

Meredith lay helpless, perhaps unconscious, though his eyes were opened wide. The Chinese scanned him dubiously. The fox-woman said: “Release him! I have power over him now—he can do nothing.”

The men arose from him. She scanned his cowed hirelings. From her to them swirled a little breeze as though a ghost left her side and joined them. It lifted flakes of ash, whirling them in tiny drift of black snow. They fluttered about the men like swarming gnats, slowly settled. Was she casting some spell with them?

Her voice lifted in strident fretfulness to Li-kong. “Did I not warn you? Go! Delay—and you die with the rest. I will not tarry on my course for your protection. As you would live—leave this valley!”

No word of greeting for the Chinese to carry back to her sisters and to Yu Ch'ien.

An instant Li-kong regarded her, as if realizing at last her madness. He eyed Paul pityingly. Then bent in hasty obeisance to the fox, turned swiftly, mustered his men. Those holding Paul dropped their hands, left him swaying. They followed Li-kong in brisk march to the gate. Those looking behind speeded their steps, for the fox-woman's face was deadly as an Erinys, one of those snake-tressed Furies who pursued Orestes in olden time.

She watched their progress over the blackened ground, past twisting columns of smoke like the baroque pillars of a nightmare palace. Her body rocked, undulated, as tremors of impatience shook it. They reached the gate, passed from sight.

Still Meredith lay sprawled and staring emptily. A pang of disappointment knifed Paul, more cruelly painful than his wounds. Was the man dead? No further chance to kill him? He grinned avidly as Meredith's chest rose and fell in breathing. Meredith lived! But not for long . . . He staggered to the prone shape, would have cast himself down on it, hands clawing . . .

The fox-woman struck him lightly. “He is not yours!” she said. “Come with me up the hill to the temple.”

He refused to budge. She frowned as she plucked at him. He was in no state to realize the import of that frown, but Fien-wi understood. She pushed him from behind. He stumbled forward, almost whining as he protested . . .

Smoke hung over the valley like a gigantic web from peak to far peak. It darkened the lowering sun to a blurred disc dull as an old bronze coin, weakened its light to a feeble rusty glimmer, fainter than moonglow. Shadows were too thin to be seen on that bleak landscape, softened now to dark velvet.

They took the path to the pagoda. It wound up the knoll, too narrow for them to move abreast, its pine snags like the bars of a cage. The scorched leafless shrubs which bordered it had become great spiders preparing to spring. Powder of ashes smoothed the path as if it were the trail of some monstrous and smooth-bellied slug.

They reached the hillock's crest, gazed upon its garden. It was a garden of hell. The oval pool was scummed with ash, surrounded by forked scraggs which once had been willows, which now were the black talons of buried demons! Beds of burned flowers lay mounded as time-flattened graves. Beside them lurked skeletal shrubs, wiry demons.

A stairway bearded the ravaged pagoda which glared on them from black holes of windows.

Pathetic was that garden in its hint of what it had been. And a mockery, the ghost of a garden set apart for ghosts of the damned.

They went up the steps, into the temple's murky interior. A portion of the roof had crumbled; the rest hung sunken and aslant. The charred and cracked panelling of the walls was like rippled black silk.

There was an immense half-globe of soot-filmed bronze, curiously carved and standing on legs like dragon claws. It was like a baptismal font; was filled with ash. With the flat of her hand the fox-woman struck it, and it vibrated like a gong. The deep hum seemed to race about the walls of the bowl, growing louder with every turn, spinning

over the sides like a sustained note of thunder. The ashes fluttered up in fantastic, tortured angles, oddly like the bowl's patterns. They hung in air, shifting in shape as though in unknown letters they spelt some cryptic word.

They flickered away through the door as though borne on the wings of the rolling sound from the bowl; were carried from the hill over black-palled fields. Like wind, the sound lifted the fox-woman's tattered garments, tossed her long loose hair.

Eyes could follow that note! It pushed the smoke before it as a shovel gathers dirt, condensed the darkling streamers into gigantic black glyphs again like the carvings on the font. From earth to sky they stretched like prodigious runes traced on a sheet of glass.

The fox-woman was waiting, breath held against slightest sound. As though that booming note was a signal, she listened for its answer.

Answer?

From—whom?

XXI

THE dozen or so of Meredith's men captured by Li-kong had not moved from their places, down by the paddock's embers. Small with distance they stood stiffly at attention, toy sentinels. The bowl's note rammed them as a bowling ball strikes teapins, sent them reeling, tumbling one over another.

They picked themselves up, crouched defensively, glared to discover what had hit them. They saw—Meredith!

The note had roused him. He was sitting up, one hand dazedly to his brow.

His men clustered together, heads close. They whispered. One pointed to Meredith; the heads of the others turned, contemplating him. Their voices buzzed in sudden noisy agreement. They scattered to the paddock's wreckage, snatched up smoking sticks. They slunk toward Meredith like a pack of coyotes stalking a lone grazing steer.

He had arisen to await them, but their skulking gait perturbed him. He backed a step or two, uncertainly.

Closer they drew. His doubt deepened to fear! He expostulated thinly; they yelled boisterous answer. He cowered, thrust out warding hands, then turned and ran. They shouted vehemently, sprinted after him, brandishing their clubs.

He scuttled now this way and again that, swerving, back-tracking, a hare before hounds. Black powder stirred by his feet and those of his hunters hung weaving behind him and them, miniature repetitions of the restless symbols overhead.

He ran through the gateway, paused to swing the grill behind him. The men crashed into it pell-mell. He gained time for breath while they pulled it open and formed anew.

He scurried from the road, they after him, all shrinking into the perspective as frantic black insects, merging into and lost among the blackness of the fields.

Paul grumbled resentfully. The fox-woman was unmoved. Ah, so she could control the men's course, swing them back when it pleased her—Meredith with them!

Far and far away loomed the snowy peaks. Their shadows had merged with the valley's blackness. Their whites, become ghostly greys, seemed tremendous fragments of soiled paper crumpled carelessly by Cyclopean hand and cast aside. As such they no longer marked the horizon. This was now a black world of illimitable distance. The effect of paper reduced Paul and the women to midgets, the temple and the hill to match-box structure on the merest sand-heap. The sun was but a bronze ball, pendent from a yard-arm lost in thickened black atmosphere.

The bowl's deep note was flung from one fold to another of that crushed grey paper; repeated and amplified, sent back in echoes as the rhythmless drumming of thunder.

Away to one side a thread of lightning glimmered and snapped, frail as gossamer strand. Others stretched, glimmered and broke, the slightest flickers of static electricity, like the little sparks which in darkness leap from a comb.

They brightened, stabbed at each other like rapiers crossed in duel; grew brilliant indeed, each flash now revealing snowy crags—the peaks were themselves again! Thunder rolled over the valley like the wheels of tremendous carts spinning across gigantic wooden bridges.

The lightnings danced—incandescent attenuated specters, kicking up thunder which gathered volume, rattling down on the lowland. In the bursts of white radiance it seemed that the mountains drew nearer, that the thunder was the tramp of their marching feet! It rocked the pagoda, dislodged a beam from the ceiling, sent it twisting down amid rain of shattering tiles from the roof.

Paul grasped Fien-wi, dragged her out on the steps. Blue tiles clattered about them and broke. The fox-woman passed them, went to the pool.

Lightning and thunder ceased. A vast sigh swept the plain, clicking the dead twigs like castanets, rippling the filmed pool. It flung acid dust into Paul's eyes and nostrils. Winking, spluttering, he heard Fien-wi's choking cough; no sound from the fox-woman. He regained breath and sight; the sigh had passed. It had been so portentous a gust that earth itself might have gaped to make it. Silence followed, so profound that Paul's ears ached with it.

What were those grey glimmers streaking down from the peaks? Were they shafts of thin sunlight? He looked up—no, the sun was dimmer than before. From all sides they raced to the hill. And what was the fox-woman doing at the pool? She had knelt on its lip, one long forefinger stirring the coated water. And murmuring—a witch chanting spells at her cauldron!

The grey gleams were long in coming . . . the valley was wide. Closer they drew . . . nearer . . . within them he sensed secondary movement . . . a seething and tumbling as of bobbing heads in a stampede of cattle . . .

Now he discerned that they were of all colors . . . luminous . . . they had blended in the distance to grey, precisely as specks of raw color combine in *pointilliste* painting to harmonies. They were people, but not as he knew them . . . beasts, but

anomalies . . . grotesque birds flapped low above them. They made no sound in advancing . . . as if their feet did not touch the earth . . .

The foremost halted, those behind piling up compactly, pausing. They ringed the knoll like spectators around an arena. Like—he realized—Meredith's men around the corral!

He limped nearer the fox-woman. She had ceased chanting, straightened. She said: "You shall see them as I, heart of mine—and know you can never escape me!"

She touched palm to his forehead, took it away. "Behold them—the foxes of this Western land!"

It was as though she had set lenses to his eyes—he could distinguish each feature as though through binoculars. It seemed she had made mistake. Foxes, she had called the beings below! But only a few were that! Perhaps she had intended the word in a broader sense; meant that these, like her, were inhabitants of the supernormal.

Effulgent as they were, their colors were subdued, none quite pure. He saw gigantic blue things neither heron nor human, long-nosed and spindle-shanked, arms bent at elbows and feathered fingers pressed to ribs, the messengers of the Great Manitou, according to Mohawk tales. Coppery eagles, totems from the north. Brown men with flattened faces and shag-furred backs, the kindly badgers, councillors of the Blackfeet. A man with scarlet wings and flashing eyes, the Thunderbird. Tremendous turquoise serpents, the snake *kachinas* of the Hopis. A giant green rattler of the mound builders. Seal and walrus fetishes of the West Coast Indians; the Papagos' slim cactus maidens spurred with thorns and flowers ablaze on their temples. Squat Pima women with grey-green skins, purple eyes and hair—spirits of the sage.

There were flowing-tressed corn gods of the Pueblo clans, golden in armor of yellow husks. Athabascans' red, green and white lancers of the aurora . . . others he could not for certainty identify . . . orange lynxes, male and female, with human eyes and ears . . . fuzzy girls striped with yellow and black, multiple eyes protuberant . . . naked little blue people hopping up and down like human marsh-fire . . .

Mingled among them were forces transplanted from across the seas and from the southern continent. Man-wolves and were-women, suicide-ravens striking fire with their wings; a rose-maiden perhaps from Persia, a drab-gowned *huldre* of Scandinavian hills, face veiled in white, hands clutching harp . . . angelic mazikeen of the Jews . . . *stille volk* from Germany, dressed in jewels . . . a sparkling cloud of the tiny *Sidh* . . . parrot people with bright-stained skins . . .

Never could Paul have seen and named them all. The fox-woman said: "They came on the thunder—and there are more than I dreamed! They find shelter in the mountains where men cannot go. Yet there are men who respect them still. And cults who in secret propitiate them . . ."

She waved to them on every side. They answered in a blurred babel of voices—cawing and cooing and shrieking, liquid babbings, hissings and rustlings. He started at the uproar, wounds burning as if rubbed with salt.

She smiled. "You did not understand them? They greeted us! And now"—she gazed beyond them—"let them sit in judgment. Let them receive me as one of their own—for well I can use them

when Meredith is gone and we set out to conquer. Ah—"

Through a gap in their ring Meredith came stumbling, pursuers close behind. He was black with grime, a black shadow of a man, eye-whites glimmering like pearl. Bent from exhaustion he labored up to the pagoda.

The fox-woman advanced to meet him! He stopped, cast a fearful look behind him, turned again to the fox-woman. He was breathing in sobs.

He whimpered something, perhaps a plea for mercy. Nothing in the woman's mein lent him reassurance. He swung to face the men following him. They had paused arguing startagems—from their gestures it was evident that half wished to continue on his trail, the rest favoring encirclement of the knoll, rushing Meredith from every side.

Meredith wavered again toward the fox-woman. He saw the spectral shapes sitting in circle, shook his head at them. Plainly he was thinking: *It's one of the damned fox's tricks! They're not real, only illusion!*

Well, men behind him, and the fox-woman were real enough! Cornered, he sank in a huddle, weeping, hand to face, tears channeling his filth, showing fallow flesh.

The fox-woman sidled closer to him. The men below ceased their quarrel and crept up the path. He kneeled to them and the woman in turn, stretching out beseeching hands, voice cracked to a husky whisper: "Please—oh, please—"

Another step they took, another—and another—deliberately slow, every one of them, fostering all his terror, building it to greater height, their faces so fiendish that for a second Paul forgot hatred for the man, even pitied him. Then steeled himself with the thought: *Well—it's what he asked!*

Meredith screamed! Mad with fear, he no longer knew fact from fancy. He reached to the assemblage, to the thousand-headed Sheshnaga, King of all snakes; to the *gund-reid* rider in fiery ring; to Couril and Nais, magamanto and drac. To the leering wolves he shrieked: "You're men like myself! Save me!"

He cried to the shimmering lancers: "Throw your spears, damn you—kill them!"

And with dying hope, forlornly, to a blind mole, he wailed: "You're a man . . . men are brothers . . . brother, help me!"

The mole chuckled. The beings near him took up the laugh, bandied it back and forth. Like a rolling snowball increasing in size the laughter swept over the multitude, swelling to uproar of merriment. The fox-woman joined in it, forgetting all caution in triumph. Back she rocked and forth, laughing in gasps like the faint call of a fox—

Meredith yelled with rage and despair, stamping feet frenziedly as if to shatter all earth with his fury, clawing breast and face as though to hasten death with his own hands! Still the men crept to him—the gloating fox-woman was but a few yards away.

One man howled, hurled sharp stick at Meredith. It drove its point in the path at his feet. Quickly he snatched it up, shrieked to the fox-woman as she swayed in laughter, needlessly pointing to him for the edification of the thoroughly appreciative throng:

"You've got me, damned witch—but I've got you, too!"

The stake flew from his hand swifter than the fox-woman's thought to prevent it—buried itself deep in the hollow of her throat!

Her laughter became strangled gurgle. Blood bubbled to her lips. The tumultuous guffawing terminated in a gasp.

Then a howl of rage! A flurry as of vast wings whirring, a restless stir of rustling bodies—

Now Meredith laughed! He slapped hands to thighs, doubled up manic mirth, fresh joyous tears rolling down his smudged cheeks!

The men were upon him. They blotted him from view, snarling, yelling, clubs lifting and falling, punching and stabbing. Hidden among them he laughed still, despite the thudding of their staves. Weaker became that laughter . . . was broken, started anew . . . choked to a whimper . . . to silence . . .

The fox-woman's back arched in agony. Her hands grasped the stake, sought to drag it from throat. It emerged red-tipped, but surely not with blood—for the stain glowed phosphorescent . . . the blood on her lips was scarlet light . . . russet-red . . .

Fien-wi ran to her, not hobbling now, all wounds forgotten. She caught the falling fox-woman, held her to her breast.

On her face amazement dawned. She looked to Paul, her expression a summons. The radiant blood seemed to steam. Tendrils of russet arose from the fox-woman's mouth and breast—rushed together, were fed by subsequent streamers. Hovered over her in thickening rosy haze.

He dashed to Fien-wi, caught the fox-woman from her, lowered her to the path. He turned her head—the wide sightless eyes were grey. No madness broke the smooth lines of her face. As the ruddy glimmers arose from lips and breast, they carried the coppery cast from her hair, left it brown and bronze-flecked.

Jean! He looked down on the face of—Jean!

What was that russet fire before him? He held Jean in his arms, yes—but the fox loomed near, solidified from the scarlet haze. Reed-slender in long gown of russet silk, hair russet-red with white lock like moonbeam threads, eyes slanting and sea-green, she was less Yin Hu of the flesh than flaming memory of her, transfigured and idealized. Fien-wi had fallen weeping at her feet.

He knew now: *Jean is dead! She has to be dead—else the fox could not have left her body. Jean—dead!*

The fox whispered in that familiar voice, the tinkling of tiny silver bells: "Do not grieve! She lives still . . . and among the arts of the foxes is healing . . ."

Perhaps she lied. Perhaps she meant healing in another sense. He took the most obvious meaning.

She murmured to the brown woman in their dialect, touched her. Fien-wi shivered and arose. Stood sagging, head bent, as if whatever the fox had told her had brought utter sorrow.

From all about the knoll the gathering shrieked still. Whether dream or real, they had raced up the slope to where Meredith's men were still hacking and tearing the raw thing before them, heedless of all menace. The creatures caught the men, pulled them down, dragged them below—there was crunching and ripping—

The fox said: "Lift Jean—bear her! Follow me." She moved up the path, back toward the ruin of the blue pagoda. He straightened, Jean in his arms. He heard Fien-wi sob, turned. She was held back as though walled from him, hands helplessly beating against that wall, desperately reaching . . .

He called: "Yin Hu! Something's holding Fien-wi back!"

She paused, the bell notes coming as if through frosted air: "She must stay behind! She broke her vow to me, denied me for Jean! Therefore—Jean must be denied to her."

The bell-sounds warmed, the green eyes glinted with amiable humor. "No—let her come. Was not all this fault of mine? Out of caprice I sought human incarnation, its price revenge. But my revenge injured the innocent and started another chain of justice! Let us finish the chain, wipe out all scores. As I give Jean to you—so let Fien-wi be forgiven!"

And faintly, to herself: "Humanity clings to me . . . best to stay fox, in fox-haven . . . I am caught here in Western world . . . here I will stay, haunting the hills . . . not again will I take to the flesh, even though to return to my sisters."

In her words was hint of the plight of those others who even now made sport of Meredith's men. Elemental beings, they had crossed the waters to strange new land in corporeal state; realized, after loss of bodies, it was wiser to shun human contact than die from its taint.

The fox gestured. Fien-wi close to Paul's side, sobbing gratefully, rubbing away her tears, gazing anxiously at the girls in his arms.

The men shrieked from the distance! Well, let them! Whatever befell them at the hands of the crowd was their due. He followed the rubiginous gleam of the fox.

And fox she was indeed! She had changed while he glanced at Fien-wi. Where Yin Hu the woman had been was—a vixen, small, lithe and dainty, prancing impatiently. She capered in light leap as his eyes found her; she turned and trotted up the path.

He had not known the knoll was so high, its path so long! The men no longer shrieked . . . the voices of the mountain-dwellers were dying away, mingling into a bumbling drone . . . like retreating thunder. He gazed down the valley. It was black . . . ah, yes . . . he remembered it had been like darkest velvet.

There were only patches of mud where Meredith had been, and his men. The mountain-folk had gathered anew into grey streamers, were flowing back to the snowy peaks. They vanished, leaving Fien-wi, the girl and himself alone with the fox.

The sun was completely lost in the blackness. All light by which he climbed came from the fox. She was tiny now and remote . . . wavering like a far candle's gleam . . .

He cried: "Yin Hu! Wait for us—wait!"

She did not answer. She glimmered like a dim red star. He struggled after her, urged the weeping brown woman onward. The path went higher into the darkness—

And higher still!

