

THE DAY OF DEBTS

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When the Spirit of Old China Demanded Its
New Year's Toll, Chung Lee Paid in Full!

THE New Year's Day was drawing to a close in Chinatown. Lights were coming on in the narrow streets and in the shop windows. The winter wind was blowing from the east, as if to bring something of the spirit of Old China to the western world on this day of celebration. With the going down of the sun, in all Chinatown there was no man who owed any other man anything. For this was the day of the paying of all debts.

Chung Lee was brewing jasmine tea for himself in his little room back of his theater. The coals glowed to a ruby red in the brazier and the steam began to jet from the spout of the little copper kettle. Chung

Lee set two cups on the taboret and dropped the fragrant leaves into them. Evidently he was expecting a visitor.

He made no move to remove the kettle. His old eyes, staring at the glowing coals, held a far away look. His face, reflected in the burnished copper as in a mirror, was sober and sad.

A knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," he said in English, knowing who his visitor would be.

A girl entered, gestured to him to keep his seat, went up to him and held out her hand. He took it in both of his.

"Happy New Year, Chung Lee," she said in a low, musical voice.

He released her hand, clasped one of his closed hands in the palm of the other, and gave them a slight shake in the Chinese gesture of good will.

"Happy New Year, Edwina Grant," he responded. Her ears caught the overtones of melancholy in his voice and her frank eyes sought his face. But she did not speak. She took off her hat and her nutria coat. There was a lissomeness and grace to her movements that smacked of the dancer. As a matter of fact, she was not clad in street dress but in costume.

She sat down and took the cup which Chung Lee handed to her, and they sipped the delicious brew in silence. They were a strange combination, the old Chinese and the American girl—the girl the very essence of modernity, the Chinese like a man out of some ancient dynasty.

Yet they were at ease with each other. This Chinese who bore within his heart and mind the wisdom of the ancient sages could nevertheless tell an American joke in a manner that would have won the approval of Mark Twain.

But he was in no mood for telling jokes now.

"It is kind of you to visit me before the performance," he said.

"Not everyone is permitted the opportunity of drinking Chung Lee's jasmine tea," Edwina replied, courteous in the Chinese manner, yet with a trace of teasing in the remark.

"Was it for my tea that you came?" Chung Lee asked, smiling slightly.

"It was to talk with a man of wisdom who has taught me much," the girl answered.

"Thank you," said the old man. "In China, reverence for elders is in the warp and woof of Chinese life. In this country, while young people no doubt love the old folks—in fact many of your popular songs deal with this theme—they have not the

patience to remain long in their company. At any rate, I am glad that you are here. I am lonely always, but on this day of the paying of old debts I am lonelier than on other days."

Whether it was the reflection of the glowing coals, or perhaps an internal surge of emotion, Edwina could not be sure. But fire seemed to flash up in Chung Lee's eyes—a fire that burned beneath his gentleness as the latent forces of a temblor slumber beneath the good earth. It was no new experience for Edwina Grant to see that flame leap up and die.

In her contact with Chung Lee, at whose theater, she learned Oriental dance forms without cost to herself save her own occasional participation in the performances, she had been vouchsafed a glimpse, every now and then, of the Chinese's secret self. To her it had been given to know that beneath Lee's old age and Buddhistic compassion, there still lurked the Chinese warrior!

"How long is it," she asked softly, "since Fay Lon—went away?"

THE old Chinese's face was impassive again.

"I do not know if you mean to ask me when my daughter left my home or left this life," he said quietly. "For among the euphemisms for the fact of death, 'went away,' is one. Since language, a product of human life, should never be soiled by fear, I have ever expressed the fact of death with the simple words, 'to die.' Therefore must I answer your question in two ways."

The old man bowed his head, but went on speaking.

"My daughter 'went away' exactly three years ago today. She 'died'—no man knows exactly when. The wisest of medical examiners could not tell, at the time she was taken from the river, how long before that she had given herself to

it.”

“Tell me, Chung Lee,” the girl said softly, “do you cherish anger in your heart against her? It is not for the young to counsel the old, but—”

Chung Lee stopped her.

“There is anger in my heart, but it is not against Little Flower. There is more than anger; there is hate, but its direction lies elsewhere. The anger is against Chung Lee, an unwise father, too strict with his daughter. The hate”—Chung Lee’s voice deepened and his body shook—“is against Joseph Carmen, who took her from me! Because I was too strict in the matter of her marrying the man of my choice, her rebellion took a perverted form and she convinced herself that the tawdry tinsel that overlaid this criminally-minded man was the pure gold of romance. So he took her from me, and when, disillusioned and broken, she went from him, it was not to her father’s bosom but to the river’s.”

Chung Lee set down his cup.

“This has been the day of the paying of the debts,” he said somberly. “So it was last year, and so the year before that. The years spin on. But that debt remains unpaid, weighing heavily upon me. It must be paid, and there is something in me that tells me”—his voice dropped—“that it will be paid. . . .”

His hand reached up and back, and, without turning, he took a short sword down from the wall. He drew it from the scabbard and ran his thumb with a feather-light touch along its blade.

“This debt,” he murmured, “will only be wiped out in blood—mine or Carmen’s.”

His eyes closed, but he went on speaking.

“In ancient days, when my ancestors paid debts of this kind, they contrived to make the payment match the offense. One forebear of mine had a nephew who was

taken captive by the lord of a neighboring province and made a slave. He became a weaver of tapestries. But so fine was the work, and so miserly was the lord in allowing him oil for light to work by, that the nephew went blind. Subsequently, by the fortunes of war, the lord became captive of my forebear.

“My forebear cut the lord’s eyes from their sockets and gave them to his nephew to eat. ‘Thou hast devoured, in thy greed, the eyes of this boy,’ my forebear said. ‘Therefore let thine own eyes be devoured by him whom thou hast offended.’ So it was done, and there was no longer a debt between them.”

HE paused, went on:

“Again, there was a cruel magistrate who condemned one of my ancestors to the salt mines, stultifying justice by accepting a bribe. In the salt mines my ancestor was whipped even as he worked, and the sweat and the salt ran into the bleeding welts together, until my ancestor prayed for death. But he was strong and served out his term.

“Then my ancestor, who was not a cruel man but an honest one who could not bear to be in debt, made captive the magistrate, and stripped him to his well-larded waist. Then he lashed him with a whip of nine straps tipped with iron. And my ancestor then, weeping even as he did so, because he was not a cruel man, patiently, rubbed salt into the many wounds—”

Chung Lee stopped short, observing that Edwina was trembling.

“It was not my wish to harrow you,” he said softly. “The men of old paid their debts, and I must pay mine. And even though I may not be able to pay in kind as they did, still I know that I will pay it.”

Edwina Grant shivered.

“You say ‘will,’ ” she said. “I’ve often

wondered why you never actively went in search of Carmen. I don't understand."

"Carmen will return," the old man said.

"How can you be so sure?"

"The certainty is within me," Chung Lee replied enigmatically. "But come, let us talk of something else. You have been on the streets of Chinatown for many hours today. Did you enjoy the celebration as much as on previous years?"

"No," she said decisively.

He showed no surprise at this seemingly unexpected response but waited for her to continue. And somehow Edwina Grant felt that they were not talking about something else at all, but about the same thing.

"No," she repeated. "I don't know what it was, but it seemed different this year. There were the same crowds, the same dragons, the same grotesqueries and masks. But I seemed every now and then to sense a false note in the merriment. Something seemed to be present that had no business being there. It was like hearing discords in music, or seeing an unnatural color in a painting, or an awkward movement in a dance. Something didn't belong."

"Alien presences, perhaps?" he suggested without levity.

She looked at him, startled, but his face betrayed nothing. Again she felt a shiver course up and down her spine.

"You see, Edwina," he went on, "I did not enjoy it, either, and perhaps for the same reasons. We are two persons, Edwina, who have sensitively tuned perceptions. That is why we are such good friends and never bore each other. Yes, there was something wrong with today's celebration. A false note, you call it. Let us leave it at that and turn to more practical matters. Tonight's performance in the theater, for example."

AGAIN Edwina had the feeling that they were not changing the subject at all, that it was still the same. That it was of one thing and one thing only that Chung Lee was speaking and both were thinking, terribly symbolized by the remembered sight that beat beneath their inward eyes—the once lovely body of Fay Lon, waterlogged and fish-ravaged, lying on a slab in the refrigerated dead-chamber of the morgue.

"First," Chung Lee said, "there will be a short play of the Mongol Dynasty set to music, to remind our audience that China has a past. Then you, with your new dance expressing the struggle of the Chinese people against the invading armies of Nippon will show the audience China's heroic present. Then, the counting of the money—"

"The what?" Edwina broke in.

"An item that was not on the original program," the old man said smoothly. "Today, as you know, saw the settling of all money-debts. But instead of, as formerly, paying the moneys over to the individuals entitled to them, all moneys representing debts have been deposited with me and now repose in my safe. Every creditor has agreed to contribute one-fourth of his collected debt to China."

"My people like ceremony. So we are making a ceremony of the counting of the money. And we are in hopes that through the artistry of your interpretative dancing, the creditors and the other members of the audience will be moved to open their purses still wider. In fact, my dear, I am quite sure they will."

"But isn't it dangerous?" Edwina protested. "So much money in one place. You should have a police guard."

"There will be no police," Chung Lee said. "We shall not need police. More tea?"

Edwina, staring at him, shook her

head. His face was in repose, but his old eyes, staring back at her, glowed with something deadly. For the first time since she had known him, she was afraid of him.

Chung Lee's theater was crowded that night, every seat taken, and all standing room occupied as well. The audience was in festive regalia and some of them still wore the grotesque heads and masks with which they had paraded in the streets.

The place was filled with the sound of their chatter, yet in that chatter, running deep, there seemed to be something different from the usual good cheer—a note of apprehension, an anticipation of menace, a foreshadowing of terror. And this merged naturally with the doings on the stage when the curtain went up.

At the edge of the rice field, the princess met the peasant. No speech passed between them, but in pantomime they expressed their hopeless love. The rice stalks parted, revealing a face. The two did not see the face and the stalks came together again. But the audience knew that the spy had gone off to report to the warlord.

The curtain fell, rose again. The princess was the captive of the warlord. Once again she rejected his suit. The warlord gave orders that she was to die. The manner of her death would be horrible. In the warlord's court was a circular pool, and out of its depths rose a slimy octopus.

Two slaves seized the girl, cast her to the octopus. The poor young farmer entered now. He cast himself into the pool and the lovers died together. The curtain descended.

The audience was silent, did not applaud. The poor farmer had chosen to die. It was a bad choice. A better choice would have been to fight. The audience understood that. But there was also something sinister in its silence.

Once again the curtain rose, to the music made by a dulcimer with sixteen sets of strings played with two bamboo beaters. Also there were flutes and two-stringed violins, cymbals and drums. And to this music, Edwina Grant danced.

IN her dance the Chinese farmer no longer chose to die. Instead he fought his Japanese oppressors. And it was not one farmer, but millions, symbolized by the great dragon that came from out the green-curtain background and hovered overhead.

Edwina Grant danced with fear in her heart, not knowing whence the fear came. Her vision was dimmed by the footlights, yet she made out Chung Lee, sitting on the middle aisle in the front row. His face looked ghastly. Vainly she sought in that face some recognition of her. But Chung Lee was staring at her as at a stranger.

And suddenly all was commotion. With a horrific discord, the music stopped. Abruptly there was a presence on the stage other than Edwina Grant. An arm reached from behind, a white hand closed roughly over her mouth, and she was jerked backward. Another arm shot beneath her own, and she saw a hand that held an automatic.

A thrill of terror ran through her. She could not see the man behind her, yet she knew that her body was being used as a shield.

For the first time since the first curtain had gone up, a voice sounded from the stage, rough and evil and murderous. And it was the voice of a white man. "Everything's under control. Open the safe, Chung Lee!"

Chung Lee had risen. Clapsed in his right fist was the short sword Edwina Grant had seen him test with his thumb.

There was a strange rustling, a strange moving in the audience, and from the

stage it was difficult to make out what was happening. Above the shuffling sounds, Chung Lee's voice rose in almost a chant: "Collect your debt, Joseph Carmen!"

And he raised the short sword. The eyes of Joseph Carmen were suddenly shot with a savage perplexity. He was trying to make out what was happening out front and was finding it difficult. Something caught his eye and his automatic spouted flame. But whether or not the bullet had struck human flesh he could not tell.

"Put down the shiv, old fool, before I blast you!" Carmen shouted, brandishing the gun.

The old man drew back his arm to strike. The girl stared at him in terror. For as he was gazing with fiery eyes not at Carmen but at her own body, as if she and not Carmen was to receive the blow. Even Carmen saw that, and he cried out:

"You crazy fool! If you cut loose with that, I'll make you kill the girl!"

Chung Lee's voice rose shrilly.

"So be it!" he shouted wildly. "The blade is long! *Through her to you!*"

And the fanatical old man, brooking no obstacle between himself and his long-sought vengeance, his eyes locked with the unbelieving eyes of Edwina Grant, drove the sword with all his might into the abdomen of the girl with whom he had so recently sipped the precious jasmine tea!

With a hoarse shout, anxious only to avoid that deadly blade which, piercing the girl, could still pierce and kill him as well, Carmen bounded back. The stricken girl slumped, leaving Carmen exposed. He swung his automatic around to level on the old man, but too late! The sword flashed in the air and its tip plunged into Carmen's heart. He died instantly.

The commotion, the commotion that was so strangely quiet, still went on in the audience. And at last its meaning grew clear. Clusters of Chinese men had

surrounded individual men, stripped them of their heads and masks and weapons. The process had commenced upon the very instant of Carmen's appearance on the stage.

Not a shot had been fired save Carmen's single one. Carmen was dead, and his white aides were prisoners of the quiet Chinese who had carried out their assignments so efficiently.

FAY LON was avenged. But at what cost! The motionless body of Edwina Grant—

But Edwina Grant was stirring. She sat up dazedly and looked down at her waist. There was no rip in the dress, no blood. Chung Lee knelt beside her, took her hands.

"Forgive me," he murmured. "I had not intended you to go through such an ordeal, but things arranged themselves in that special way after I had arranged the general scheme."

"You—you stabbed—" she could not go on.

"No," he said gently. "Even when I plunged the sword seemingly at your body, as though to seek in your death another's, you should still not have believed that I would harm you. The sword—I will show you some day how it works, when the blood is off it. I will only say now that the blade is not a single piece but composed of many pieces cunningly fitted so that it may be collapsed to any dimension. The hilt is equipped with little buttons each attached to its special spring, and by pressing the right ones, the sword can be shortened to any length desired. A convenient device for a theatrical performance where realism is desired."

They rose together. He sought her eyes again. "You have not said that you forgive me," he murmured.

She thought a moment, shook her

head. His face saddened. Then all at once it was full of happiness, for she was saying:

“It is I who must ask forgiveness of you, for doubting you even—even—Well, let us each forgive the other. But how did you arrange all this? You seem to have known that Carmen would come.”

“It can be said that I lured him here,” Chung Lee said simply. “I did not know where he was, nor did the police. But you have a word for it—the grapevine—and that is how it was done. Word was sent out over the country. In every city and hamlet where there were Chinese, or even a single Chinese, the word entered to find Carmen. And when he was found, to implant in his mind the idea that a big haul was to be had and why. Carmen, who had always made a specialty of preying upon the Chinese, was almost certain to rise to the bait.”

“But his men?” Edwina asked. “How could you be sure you could control that part of it?”

“They were all spotted—that is the right word, isn’t it?—almost as soon as they entered Chinatown. And from that moment, not a single one of them was ever out of sight of one or more Chinese. Even as they sat in the audience, disguised in their festive regalia, each one was known. And when the time came, my people acted quickly, quietly, and skillfully.”

His voice rose as he faced the audience. “I thank you all,” he said simply. “I, too, on this day of our New Year, no longer have any debts.”

And Edwina Grant and Chung Lee bowed together to the audience. The performance was over.