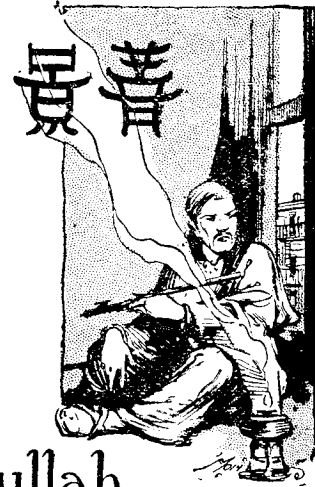


Himself to Himself Enough

by Achmed Abdullah



AT the shock of noon, as was his habit, Ching Shan rose from his bed, made a vague and sketchy toilet but for the elaborate brushing of his teeth, and crossed into the little front room that caught the hectic, frosty rays of the sun as they shivered through the dome of sooty Pell Street smoke with a certain cosmic energy.

Carefully studying the sky, he picked out from among the clouds and the smoke a jagged blotch of pure, smaragdin blue that dimmed into delicate jade where it disappeared behind the contours of the joss temple across the way; as carefully, he stored away the memory of the bit of color in his tenacious Mongol brain.

It was a rite of his, an integral and not unimportant part of his daily search—a deliberate, philosophic, constructive search—after peace, beauty, long life, and happiness.

"These four are enough for me," he would say in his precise Harvard English to Miss Edith Rutter, the social settlement investigator, when, in the conceited innocence of her heart, she preached to him the message of the gentle Christ. "No. Personally I do not care for unselfishness. It is so immoral. For it takes away from the strong—who should

possess the fruits of the earth, and gives to the weak—who should not have anything except, perhaps, the rind. Why? Because they are weak—thus fools!"

Turning away from the window he lit two lotus incense sticks before a hideous, paunchy joss idol with whom he was on terms of tolerant and rather saturnine intimacy, went back to his bedroom, pressed his lips to the rubber tube which led into the kitchen of the Great Shanghai Chop Suey Palace downstairs, and gave his order for breakfast in a gentle singsong. The same order, day after day: "A dish of fried noodles. A heaped platter of rice. A handful of dried shrimps. A cup of cloudy mountain tea. Have the tea served in my Tibetan celadon cup painted with the picture of the Lord Buddha in the *abhaya* pose. For this is Tuesday, and this day last week you made a mistake. You served my tea in the Wednesday cup, the blue Ming cup with the white flowers, thus disturbing the delicate harmonies of my soul. Also my pipe. My bamboo pipe with the black tassels and the Yu-nan jade mouthpiece."

"Listen is obey, O wise and older brother!" came the reply of Nag Hong Fan, the restaurant proprietor.

"Very well."

After which Ching Shan, while waiting for his food, sat down at his writing-desk, unrolled a scroll of creamy vellum, dipped pointed brush into thick, black ink, and continued the ode at which he had been working for over a year.

It was an ode against an enemy of his youth, a certain Kwang Ch'i-ch'ao, governor of Canton, whom he called in his poem *Hunte-kung*, or the "Duke of Confused Virtues" — well-meaning bungler, in other words.

By a curious twist of Chinese ideographic writing, each stanza wound up with the characters of Ching Shan's own name.

Thus:

景善

But the two characters, taken in connection with the two preceding ones, were read and pronounced in an entirely different manner, quite untranslatable and, from a Chinese point of view, delightfully humorous. Read this way, they reflected grievously on the governor's honor, and, since the man had died twenty years earlier, would cause his spirit to lose a great deal of face.

Ten minutes later P'i Hsiao, the hunchback, who did odd bits of work for the restaurant proprietor, came in with food, opium, lamp, and needle, and Ching Shan closed his writing-desk with a sigh of satisfaction.

He was conscious of a warm glow of happiness as he beheld the hunchback's twisted features and contorted limbs.

"Put down the tray," he said in his gentle, gliding accents. "Over there, P'i Hsiao. Wait, though. In the future I shall call you I-Ho Yuan, an exquisite jest which you, as a Pekingese, will appreciate and savor. For I-Ho Yuan is the name of the summer palace in the imperial city, being thus named after a

sentence in the book of rites and honorable outer observances which means 'to give rest and peace to Heaven-sent old age!' And, whenever I see you, I feel rest and peace.

"Everything in life goes by contrast, and here am I, fifty years of age, rich and healthy, and satisfied with life and what life has brought me, and there are you, a mean, poor, stinking, tainted pimple of a man. I am jade, precious and green, while you are alabaster, brittle and ugly and useless, and it was the philosopher of the province of Lou, speaking one day to Tzeu-Kong, who explained why jade is beloved by the wise, and alabaster is not.

"Yes? A most charming thought of the worthy Nag Hong Fah to have my breakfast served by a hunchback. I shall send him a chest of mandarin blossom tea for the New Year. Now go, O not wanted!"

And he sat down to his meal, sipping his tea noisily and using his fingers instead of his nacre-inlaid ivory chop sticks.

"For," to quote his own words, "good manners are only a contrasting foil for the awkwardnesses of youth. To youth the world looks for good manners, as a peasant looks for the harvest of glutinous millet in the first month of autumn. But old age, being careless of the world's opinion, can afford the splendid elevation of thoroughly bad manners. I know it. I have thought about it. I have thought left, and I have thought right."

The whole—from the studying of the noon-sky to the burning of the incense sticks, from the baiting of P'i Hsiao to the noisy tea-sipping—was a ceremony to Ching Shan. It was a daily episode, a rite, a quintessence of proper habits which he performed and solemnized with the heavy, hierarchic irony of a claret-robed Tibetan monk declaiming the *prajna paramita*, the fictitious Buddhist gospel on Transcendental wisdom, before the altar.

Yes! A ceremony, almost beautiful to his Chinese mind!

And he had performed it daily, without the slightest variation, since his fortieth birthday ten years earlier, when he had given up his Broadway office and his great apartment on Riverside Drive and had moved to Pell Street—that self-centered, passively inimical and entirely supercilious Asiatic alluvium which, in spite of Kearney, California, and the Exclusion Act, squats flaccid, obese, but sublimely obstinate among the white man’s hysterical skyscrapers that close it on all sides like a tide of carved stone.

He had lived on Riverside Drive for business reasons. Now, retired, with no pursuit in life except that of peace, beauty, long life, and happiness, he preferred to herd with his own people. Pell Street, the white man called it, and cursed its reek and dirt; but Ching Shan, who, for a couple of decades had moved in the white man’s best social and commercial circles called it the Street of the Thousand and Three Beatitudes, and praised its rich flavor.

Breakfast over, he smoked his first pipe—“the honorable pipe of august beginning,” he called it—just a miniature cylinder of amber-colored opium held over the lamp, fizzling, dissolving, evaporating, the bowl filled, the acrid smoke inhaled at one breath; and he proceeded with his daily routine.

He walked over to the large mirror on the opposite wall of the room.

Gravely he gazed in the glass, standing a little sidewise and looking over his shoulder, following the contours of his face, the outlines of his figure, the high arch of his tiny, velvet-slipped feet. Ching Shan was pleased with himself—as he was every morning.

After all, he thought, he had not aged during the preceding night—his skin was smooth and satiny with hardly a wrinkle; his lips showed full and red beneath the drooping mustache; his hair was thick and glossy and delicately sprinkled with white; his body was

strong and well fleshed.

Too—and this was the final and most important summary of himself which the mirror gave him, no less than the gentle glow in his soul—he was tranquil, utterly without nerves, of a subtle, philosophic calm that was a constructive achievement born of adroit, wire-drawn habit and mental diet:

Peace, beauty, long life, and happiness!

Peace of the body and peace of the soul!

“For,” said Ching Shan, quoting the words of the Tso Chuan, “the upper and lower jaws mutually assist each other; if the lips shrivel, then must the teeth catch cold.”

Years ago—ten years, to be exact, and, to be more exact still, at half past eleven in the evening, five minutes after the pretentious door of his Riverside Drive apartment had closed on Calhoun Allen, his best American friend, and Sarah, the latter’s sister—he had bid a slightly pathetic farewell to the days of his exuberant youth and his ripe, achieving manhood which had been shot through with the prismatic diffractions of adventure and excitement; not only in business, since he had been a very successful merchant and, by the same token, a cool-headed gambler, but also solidally, since there was no doubt of his breeding and education—he was a Harvard graduate *summa cum laude*—and since, even from an Occidental view-point, he was considered good-looking in a heavy, rather arrogant way. Thus, more than one woman had smiled upon him with pleasure—and a certain nervous expectancy.

But, congenitally fastidious as well as quite unself-consciously conscious of the fact that, while at times the white woman, having nothing to apprehend from racial competition, has no racial prejudice, the white man, having a great deal to apprehend, nearly always has. Knowing that, his business success was importantly dependent upon his American friends’ goodwill, he had never fulfilled the

expectancy that had smiled to him from gray eyes and blue and brown.

At least, not until he had met Sarah Allen, his good friend, Calhoun Allen's sister, a woman of thirty with that strange, haunting loveliness which refuses to center itself on one particular point, the sort of beauty which is no abstract beauty in itself but an impression of beauty.

New England she was, with just that little, tiny Mayflower hypocrisy, that peculiar, evasive, and unconscious hypocrisy which rimes with lettuce sandwiches, Hawthorne and mince-pie. She had moments of Christian inhibition, as well as intervals of shouting, resolute paganism.

Almost at sight she and Ching Shan had fallen in love with each other.

Why?

Impossible to say.

Perhaps, since he was of the East, Eastern, and she of the West, Western, in spite of the fact that they had nothing in common, culturally, traditionally, and civilizationally; perhaps because of that same fact.

At all events, they had met; and they had loved. For, while there are times when life is only acted psychology, and other times when it seems an illogical deduction killed by a crassly logical fact, there are finally those rare and gray-misted moments when life is just willy-nilly submission.

Ching Shan, being an Oriental, had submitted without even trying to analyze the why and wherefore; she, being New England, had analyzed—and submitted; and, a week later, Ching Shan had invited Calhoun and Sarah Allen to help him celebrate his fortieth birthday.

Over coffee and cigarettes he had asked Calhoun Allen for Sarah's hand in marriage, and, although a sodden, shivering pall of silence had followed upon his low: "I love your sister, Allen. She loves me. I want her to be my wife!" there had been no scene at first.

For, while good breeding is differently standardized in America and China, meaning in the former country a certain spiritual aloofness blended with intellectual sympathy, and in the latter a blending of rigorous etiquette with incongruously brutal frankness, they were both gentlemen.

Allen, carefully impersonal, had marshaled his reasons, biological, theological, and historical, why he was utterly opposed to intermarriage between the yellow and the white. Ching Shan, carefully personal, had refuted the other's argument, point for point.

Both had been perfectly good-humored until, suddenly, a word—a fleeting, negligible word, and afterward it had made no difference what it had been nor who had spoken it—had destroyed the delicate equilibrium. On the spur of the moment these two representatives of the white and the yellow, gentlemen both, friends, had crystallized in their hearts all the hatred, contempt, and disgust the two races have felt for each other since the world began.

Suddenly the old racial mistrust and repulsion had whispered to them in a language of dread stillness; with dull, muffled throbbings; with the shadows of creeping, unspeakable thoughts bursting up from the abyss of dead souls.

They had looked at each other, as wolf looks at gray-wolf. They had tried to search each other's hearts. One wrong word, one wrong gesture, a smile wrongly interpreted—and these two immaculate, meticulous gentlemen in evening dress would have been at each other's throats, primevally biting and clawing.

Finally, Ching Shan had risen, walked over to the window, and had looked out into the night where the moon was flickering out behind a racing cloud-drift like a spent candle, while Calhoun Alien had turned to his sister, who had sat there, dry-eyed, trembling, silent, the tension of various emotions oddly mingled in her face and giving it an expression that

was ludicrous, straight through the horror.

He had spoken a dozen words—no more—and her love had not been able to stand up against her brother's chilly, withering contempt. Still silent, with wooden, jerky movements, she had accompanied her brother out of the room, into the outer hall, had picked up her wraps, had stepped across the threshold.

There she had turned to the Chinaman who had followed them.

"Ching!" she had said in a choked voice. "I—I love you. I shall never forget you. Perhaps—some day—I—shall—"

And Ching Shan's words had cut through hers like a knife:

"Would I drag for the moon reflected in the water? Would I keep meat on trust with the jackal? Would I look for love and friendship and loyalty in the heart of—"

Suddenly his voice had peaked to a cracked screech:

"Damn you! Damn you and yours!"

Then the door had clanked shut on Sarah and Calhoun Allen, and he had been alone.

He had prepared and lit an opium pipe, the first in twenty years, and, five minutes later, his mind had been made up.

"Peace!" he had said to the purple night-sky. "There is no Calhoun Allen. There is no Sarah Allen. There is no white man. I doubt that there is a Chinaman. There is only Ching Shan, the individual. There is no friendship, no love, no enmity, no hatred. There is only my own body, my own soul, my own heart. There is only myself—to myself enough, for myself enough."

And so, on his fortieth birthday, he had, to quote his own words, given up vigorously threshing mere straw. He had left his apartment and sold his business at a considerable loss, which he had nowise regretted; he had prudently swept his mind and thoughts and conscience free of everything except the cult of peace, beauty,

long life, and happiness.

"The highest heights of love and friendship and loyalty and unselfishness and ambition," he would say to Miss Edith Rutter, the social settlement investigator, "are nothing except inane limbos created by one's own imagination. Useless, tinkly things. Bad for the nerves, bad for man's happiness, bad for man's digestion—a trinity which holds to me a sounder truth than the one mentioned in Buddha's Diamond Sutra, or your own worthy New Testament."

To-day his life was an exquisite mosaic of gentle but steely habits, logically calculated, fitted into each other, and carried out with the intention of making every minute a guarantee for the quiet happiness of the entire day. With ruthless single-mindedness, he had arranged all his daily acts, from the moment of rising to his final pipe in the back room of Nag Hong Fan's restaurant, known as the honorable pavilion of tranquil longevity, where he was a passive listener and onlooker, silent, self-contained, and much respected by the Pell Street aristocracy.

He looked at his watch. It was a little after one. Time for his second pipe, and then a leisurely stroll across Chatham Square, through the East Side, and over to the North River.

Yesterday the sun had been wonderful—had misted the rippling waves with golden, purple-nicked gauze. Doubtless to-day, too, he would be able to find some beautiful nuance of color. Perhaps glaucous green. He admired glaucous green. It was so peaceful.

He smiled—and turned, a little annoyed, when he heard the buzzing of the rubber tube that led into the Great Shanghai Chop Suey Restaurant.

Nag Hong Fah had his orders for everything. That was what he paid him for. What did he want of him? Why did he—

Zzt-zzt-zzt!—zummed the buzzer, and

Ching Shan crossed the room and pressed his mouth against the orifice.

"What is it, grandfather of a skillet?" he asked in a low, even, passionless voice, careful not to excite himself.

But Nag Hong Fan's thick accents were pregnant with perturbation and, too, with curiosity.

"A woman!" his answer drifted up. "A woman to see you, O wise and older brother!"

"A—what?"

"A woman to see you! A foreign devil! A white woman! Her name is— Wait!"

Ching Shan could hear Nag Hong Fah's staccato, stuttering English, and a woman's softly slurred reply, then again the former speaking through the tube in Chinese:

"Her name is Sa-lah! Can you hear, worthiness? Sa-lah Allen! She says she must see you speak to you at once. She says that—"

"Wait!"

For the fleeting fraction of a moment Ching Shan was undecided. For the fleeting fraction of a moment he wondered, speculated. Sarah! Sarah Allen! The woman he had loved, who had been like incense in his heart, who had been to him the breath of all things!

What did she want? Why had she come here? Did she want to—

"Ho! Nag Hong Fah!" he called down.

"Yes?"

"Tell her to—wait, wait!"

He paused, shivered a little. He was afraid to speak to her, afraid to find out what she wanted, afraid to have her jar the delicate and precise equilibrium of his daily life.

Why—

The door opened, and P'i Hsiao entered, with the second pipe of the day, a long ivory affair, with a rose-crystal mouthpiece and silver tassels; and, suddenly, Ching Shan made up his mind to decide his future.

Here was his pipe, his walk to follow, his search for a bit of glaucous green color. Here was his daily life, minutely arranged, minutely dovetailed. Here was peace, beauty, long life, and happiness. Here was he himself, to himself enough.

He pressed the rubber tube against his lips:

"Nag Hong Fah!"

"Yes, O wise and older brother?"

"Tell the woman I do not recall her!"

And he turned to the hunchback who stood waiting, pipe in hand.

"Great pimple!" he said. "Consider yourself—and myself! Consider that peace, beauty, long life, and happiness are—"