

The Little Love-God

By Alden Arthur Knipe

There are, of course, many things that Tan-Shin will never understand, no matter how much he may puzzle over them during the long nights. To this day Helen insists that he is a love-god (which, to say the least, is humiliating), and Jack, such is his ingratitude, scoffs openly at his powers; nevertheless, they are both constant in their devotion, and Tan-Shin recognizes the compensation. Being very, very old; the years are as days to Tan-Shin, so he remembers vividly how it happened. It began in a Chinese temple across the sea (he had been sitting there for centuries), and he was absorbed in his own godly affairs when the discordant clamor of a tumult interrupted his meditations. Short, quick rifle reports, the clashing together of steel weapons, groans and imprecations in foreign tongues, the hurried tramp of many feet, all added to the indescribable din of composite noises, came nearer and nearer, culminating in a roar as the door of his particular domain was burst open. Profane hands, grimy with the reek of battle, reached out, tore him ruthlessly from his shrine and thrust him, head first, regardless of his age or dignity, into a sack already tenanted by several lesser deities.

Poor Tan-Shin! The peace of ages was ended, and there was immediate danger that contact with these trumpery gods would shatter his highly glazed surface. The sooty toe of an unyielding sea-god pressing against his left jade eye gave him no opportunity to speculate upon the degradation of associating with the company in which he found himself. But for the kindly interposition of a highly embroidered tunic of recent manufacture, Tan-Shin must have perished at once, and, although such contact was distinctly mortifying to an ancient god, it is a fact that without it certain spots in his frail anatomy must surely have given way.

This, however, was but a temporary torture; he was shortly taken out of the sack, bundled up in straw, and deposited in the bottom of a box. For many months he remained there while the dust sifted down upon his beautifully polished back till he lost all resemblance to a valuable antique and looked like a very common and very dirty piece of china.

But patience was one of Tan-Shin's lesser attributes, so that he held persistently to his precious parts in the hope that Fate might relent, and after many changes from one place to another he was finally freed from the objectionable straw, washed clean of the dust accumulated in many parts of the world, and at length deposited with a great deal of care on a smooth glass shelf of a cabinet.

The relief that this change brought was truly expressed in the settled grin of his round face. He thought himself over and found no blemish upon his cracked surface. Even the several weak spots, of which he was keenly conscious, and not a little fearful, were still intact.

He gazed about him anxiously and was glad to find himself among his own kind. Through the glass door of the cabinet he saw quantities of Chinese fabrics hanging on the walls, carvings innumerable stood upon tables, shrine-doors, temple bells, embroideries, vases, bronzes, ivories—in short, a conglomerate collection of the odds and ends of his own empire. He thought at first that he was back again in his own land, but as he looked more closely his joy was turned to sorrow. The incongruous arrangement of his surroundings convinced him at once that this could not possibly be China. Out of the corner of his eye he saw standing quite close to him a spurious folk-lore idol with whom he could not associate and for whose presence on the same shelf there could be no rational explanation. Sacred beasts and birds of origin almost as ancient as his own were forced to consort with cheap and flaming counterfeits of such recent manufacture that Tan-Shin, in utter disgust and sorrow for such lack of judgment, cracked under his glaze.

This inexplicable condition of things was bad enough, but Tan-Shin soon discovered another fact that made him still more indignant. Crowds of people came to see the collection, and, although he knew himself to be the most ancient and powerful god there, he received but scant attention. The worshippers (they could be nothing else from Tan-Shin's point of view) passed him by with hardly a glance, while cruder shaped and newly made copies of the old gods received unstinted praise.

One morning Tan-Shin discovered that, from one being at least, he was receiving something like proper respect. True, she was a woman—a disappointment, for his attributes were not appropriate to females, nor did he desire to have any dealings with them—still her appreciation of him seemed quite genuine, so, on the whole, he was pleased with her. She was young, and her hands were clasped together in an attitude he understood perfectly.

The next day she came again, bringing another girl with her, and with some satisfaction he saw them make straight for his cabinet.

"There he is, Edith!" exclaimed the first girl, pointing a long, white finger at him; "the crackle-ware one, on the left."

"Isn't he just perfectly fascinating?" replied Edith.

Tan-Shin started a crack under his glaze from pure joy. It was not according to rule, but it was distinctly worship.

"And, Helen," continued Edith, "he must be ages old."

"Oh, yes! Ages and ages! And wouldn't he fit nicely on the mantel in the studio?" Helen was almost kneeling before Tan-Shin in her effort to see him the better.

"Helen!" exclaimed Edith with conviction, "you simply must get him."

But Helen looked doubtful. "He must be worth such a lot of money and I ought not to spend a cent," she replied.

"Of course, he might go at a bargain—you can't ever tell at an auction—though I'm sure he's very valuable."

Tan-Shin listened eagerly, for money was distinctly in his line.

"Maybe no one else will want him," said Edith encouragingly.

"Maybe not," Helen answered hopefully. "He'll be sold on Thursday, and I mean to try to bid him in."

There were some words in this dialogue that, god though he was, he did not understand, and auction was one of them. Still, he knew that, whatever it was, it happened on Thursday, and he waited impatiently.

Quite early on that day he was removed from the cabinet and placed upon a table in a large room where a great many people sat in ordered rows. He looked about him eagerly. In a pulpit near by, a high priest (so Tan-Shin supposed) chanted unintelligible words incessantly. Before them all was an elevated red plush-covered stand that Tan-Shin knew at once to be the altar. He saw several lesser deities placed upon it for a time, heard the murmur of the high priest, and the spurious gods were apparently banished. With a glow of pride he recognized the ceremony and knew that this was the place of choosing. These discriminating beings were deciding which were the real and which were the unreal gods. The hour of his triumph was at hand, for now he would receive the respect due a veritable antique. At last his turn came.

"Lot number 376 in your catalogues, ladies and gentlemen. A crackle-ware piece, rare and valuable. What am I offered to start—"

So chanted the high priest, and although Tan-Shin did not comprehend what the words meant, the silence of the worshippers was ample assurance that his true worth was at once perceived.

A voice in the audience broke in upon his thoughts, and he saw, leaning forward, a pink flush on each cheek, the girl who had been his first-worshiper. Evidently she

was asking a boon through the high-priest, and he resolved that the granting of her wishes should be his initial manifestation.

Then a man made a request, but to Tan-Shin's surprise the girl immediately followed with another prayer. This was repeated several times, but he noticed that the girl had been the last to speak and that she looked up at him anxiously.

Again there was silence. Even the monotonous chanting had stopped. Suddenly there was a sharp sound of a pencil being struck, the high priest uttered one word, "Sold!" and, to the chagrin of Tan-Shin, he was whisked off the altar. As he was being carried away, he heard the droning of the high priest begin again: "Lot number 377 in your catalogues, ladies and gentlemen—"

words, such as "technique" and "composition," which he did not understand. But one day the following sentences attracted his attention, and he listened intently: "But, Jack, money isn't everything!" Helen was saying.

"It's everything to me from now on!" Jack replied almost passionately. "I've been working ten years, thinking of nothing but my art, and what is the result? You're doing the same thing—and now where are we? We're poor, desperately poor, because we won't paint the pretty things that everybody wants and instead have tried to do something of real value. Well, I'm done! I tell you the only thing worth having is money and I'm tired of making sacrifices for the sake of a visionary idea that we call art."

"Jack," pleaded Helen, "don't talk like that. You

what he wants and there won't be any more bother about money and we can—"

Helen stopped abruptly while a pink flush stole into her face, and she leaned forward to kiss Tan-Shin on his shiny forehead.

She did no work that day and was gay and grave by turns. There was an uncertainty about it all that was inexplicable to the silent god, but from her frequent references to Jack it was evident that he played a large part in her affairs, and the manner in which he would receive the news of this suddenly acquired wealth was evidently of vital importance.

He came early in the afternoon, and Helen flushed when she heard his step on the stairs.

"Jack," she began anxiously, "such good news. I sent you because there is no one else to tell."

"Sold a picture?" he asked with evident interest.

"Oh! better than that, lots better than that; but you couldn't ever guess! Uncle Horace, Mama's brother, you know, died and left me ten thousand dollars."

She looked eagerly at him. Jack straightened up in his chair, and his face became set.

"I'm very glad," he said quite formally. "I suppose you will now go abroad at once."

Helen caught her breath. "I thought you would be so glad," she said with manifest disappointment.

"I am glad," he answered without enthusiasm.

"But, Jack, you don't understand," she began plaintively. "We've known each other always and shared our things since we were children and—"

"Don't go on!" he broke in. "You must see that this is different. Tubes of paint and brushes and little things like that don't count, but I couldn't touch your money."

"I don't see why not," she answered, her voice breaking; "it isn't any different now to what it always was."

"Everything is different," he replied almost roughly, "as different as day and night."

comfort, so you must be a love-god as I thought. Why couldn't he have had an Uncle Horace? For now the money has spoiled it all, and I just hate it."

It was quite beyond Tan-Shin's comprehension. Certainly Helen had wanted money, but the possession of it made her more unhappy than ever. Also, she said that she hated it, which was a unique condition that he could not conceive of, but—worst of all—it seemed that because of the money she was going away, and that meant much to Tan-Shin.

For the next two weeks he pondered over the problem, while Helen packed her steamer trunk and prepared to leave the studio for an indefinite time.

The final day of parting arrived, and Jack, with a grave face, came for her.

"Good-bye, my little god," she whispered softly to Tan-Shin; "take care of him for me while I am away and keep me always in his thoughts."

So she had gone, and Tan-Shin knew that Jack would presently return alone to take up his abode there. His reasoning over the cause of Helen's departure had led him to several conclusions, and he intended to profit by the experience in the future. The money was, without doubt, the cause of all the difficulty. Therefore, Helen's unhappiness and her ultimate abandonment of him were traceable to his interference in her affairs. But Jack had forced her to go abroad and was entirely responsible for her wear. Thus Tan-Shin concluded first, that money and trouble were synonymous in this strange country, and second, that he disliked Jack cordially. Then he remembered that Helen had told him in her first conversation on the subject that money would be Jack's ruin. Very well, then, money Jack should have! And the more miserable it made him the better Tan-Shin would be pleased. Money with all its attendant difficulties should pour in upon this despoiler of his shrine, and Tan-Shin gloated over his prospective revenge.

There was only one possible chance that these plans would miscarry. In the event of Jack's neglecting him or failing to show any respect these schemes would be useless, for it was necessary that the recipient of his bounty should be a worshipper. Therefore, the god waited anxiously for the coming of his victim.

Jack arrived after dark and closed the door behind him with a bang. "She's gone, little god," he said, "gone, gone, gone! and we'll be mighty lonesome without her."

Tan-Shin, watching intently, saw Jack take what he thought was a white stick out of a box and put it into his mouth. Then he struck a match as Helen had when she lit the gas. But Jack held the light to the white stick between his lips for a moment and then blew it out, so that Tan-Shin could only see a bright, burning point in the darkness. Presently Jack came over to the mantel, and a little cloud of smoke enveloped the god.

"Incense!" was Tan-Shin's first thought. His longed-for incense had come at last, and although it was not the kind to which he was accustomed, still it was incense. He knew that Jack was worshipping, and he sent out his occult vibrations with all the energy of the old days in China. Jack puffed away at the cigarette, talking now and then disconsolately of the absent Helen or growling at his poverty, little dreaming that Tan-Shin was saying charms that would soon make him prosperous.

It was not until the cigarette had been thrown away that the god realized what had occurred. This unexpected demonstration on Jack's part had, for the moment, really put all thought of retaliation out of his mind, and he had worked his spells quite mechanically. He was disconcerted, therefore, when the truth came to him that, in return for this incense, he would only be giving trouble; but this did not bother him long, for, being a god of riches, and possessing consistent attributes, he was, of course, deficient in gratitude.

He had used his most potent endeavors, and knew that results might be expected at once, so he watched Jack open a letter on the following morning, grimly pleased in anticipation of the results. But Tan-Shin was hardly prepared for what happened. Jack read the letter with delight, jumped to his feet and strode up and down the room with every evidence of keenest joy. Then he stopped before the mantel.

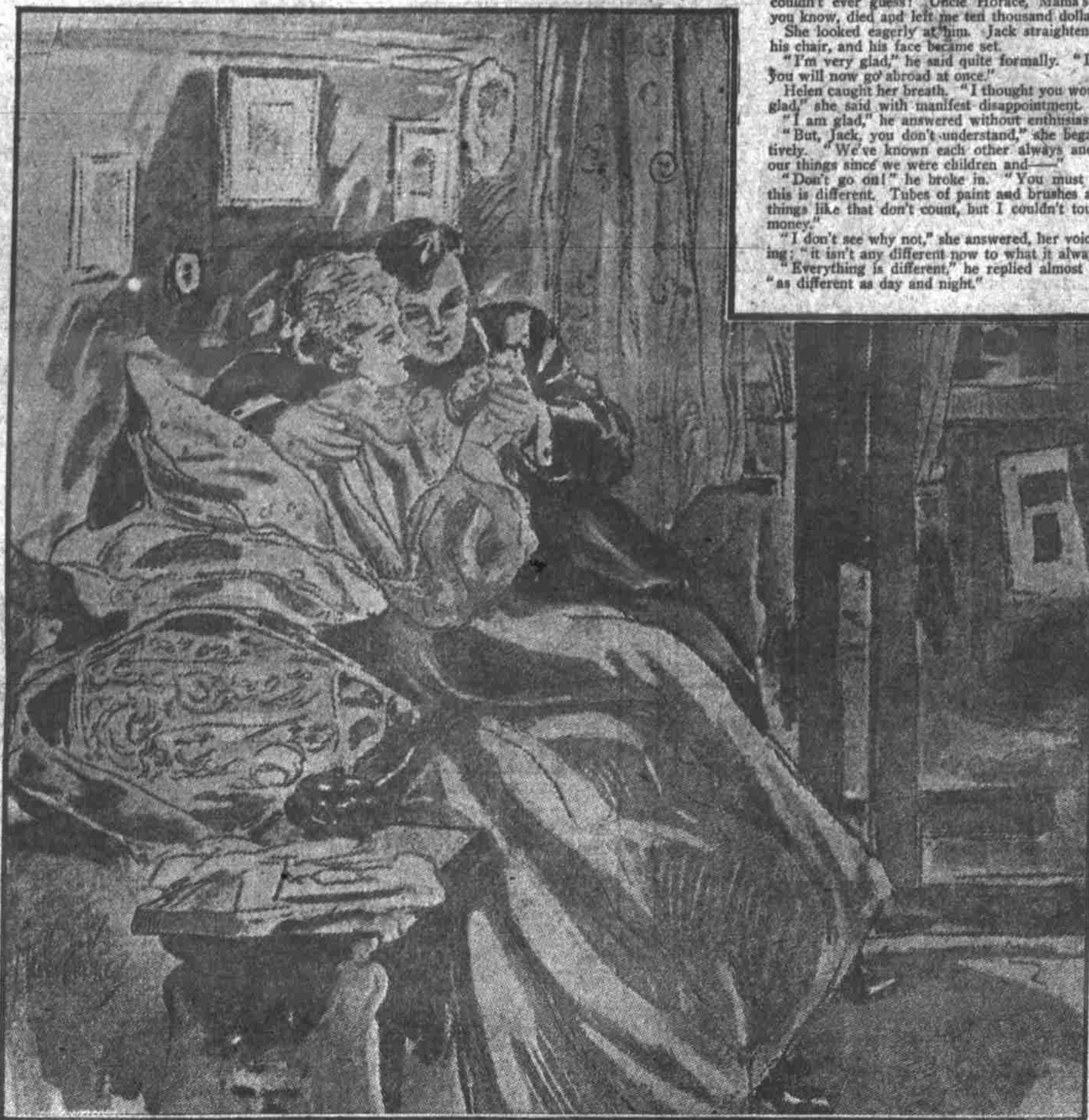
"You foxy old god," he said irreverently. "I've won the gold medal, and that means money. You don't understand; no one would bid Helen, and she's gone. Pity that boat couldn't have waited a day later. Never mind, old boy, maybe this luck will keep up, and, if it does, I'll be going over there to bring her back."

In the three months that followed, Tan-Shin received almost daily evidence of his failure in the revenge that he had planned. Instead of the expected trouble Jack seemed to radiate happiness and went about his work singing or whistling the five-long day. Also he was very busy. There were people coming constantly to the little studio who would sit patiently while he painted them; and as each canvas went out of the door Jack's spirits became more and more buoyant. Then, to Tan-Shin's utter perplexity Jack made another revelation.

"Only a little more now," he confided one evening during the incense ceremony, "only a little more money and we'll be going across the water to bring her back. Yes, you're going, too, you silly old idol. You may be a love-god, as Helen insists, although you don't look the part, but you're certainly a lucky piece of furniture for anyone to have about. When that bank account gets just a bit bigger, off we go."

Tan-Shin ceased to speculate upon the happenings in this strange land. He confessed to himself that he did not understand the absolutely diverse conditions that the possession of money seemed to produce. Jack, instead of being ruined by wealth, as Helen had positively predicted, threw on it and wanted more. Therefore, the god selfishly, it must be admitted, since he wanted to see Helen himself, gave up all thought of revenge and did his best for Jack with marked success.

One bright morning Jack took Tan-Shin down from the mantel. "We're going to her, and we start this very day, you fat old thing. Don't you dare break!" he exclaimed joyfully. Then he wrapped a large bath towel about the god and very carefully put him away in a corner of the steamer trunk.



THEN HELEN HELD TAN-SHIN CLOSE TO HER AND WHISPERED IN HIS EAR, "YOU'RE MY LITTLE GOD, ANYHOW."

Later Tan-Shin found himself seated upon the smooth surface of a marble mantel. He cared little what had happened to him after his disappointment at the auction and knew only that he had been bundled up in paper and carried away.

The girl stood in front of him, her eyes dancing with delight as she looked at him.

"You're all mine now!" she exclaimed.

Tan-Shin observed her critically, and, after a moment's thought, he said a strange Chinese word, a word so old that even in China it is obsolete, but it exactly described her and meant charming, and beautiful, and good, and wholesome and many other appropriate adjectives.

Thus it was that Tan-Shin secured a final resting-place, and as the days went by he found that the girl never ceased her attentions. "Surely," he thought, "she is worshipping."

True, it was not the form to which he was accustomed; it was not sufficiently dignified, and this merry disciple was hardly grave enough to fulfil all the requirements of an exacting ritual; but on the whole, it seemed entirely genuine.

The shrine in which Tan-Shin was now installed was a studio just under the roof of a small house with a little room communicating, into which this new-found patroness disappeared for the night. A large easel, directly under a skylight, was the most conspicuous object within his range of vision, and he soon found that Helen (he remembered her name) worked at it incessantly. He was glad of this because it kept her before him all the time. She talked to him constantly, knowing well his discretion in the matter of secrets and trusting him implicitly.

Tan-Shin was, therefore, almost happy in his new surroundings, but there were two conditions necessary to make him perfectly content. Since that fatal day when he had been torn from his shrine there had been no incense offered to him, and the little wreaths of scented vapor were sweet to his nostrils. His other trouble came through Helen. She was constant in her devotion, occasionally placed flowers in a tall vase beside him and chatted continually to "my little god," as she called him, but as yet she had never asked him to exercise his special gifts in her behalf. For an active god who had been struggling with the adverse fortunes of his worshippers all his life this lack of occupation was trying. So he racked his brains to discover what her needs might be. It was through Jack that Tan-Shin received the hint of what she wanted. Jack was the most constant visitor to the little studio and played a conspicuous part in many of the confidences between Helen and the god. Usually the conversations between the two were of no interest to him, for they used many

don't mean it, and you mustn't think of spoiling your future in any such way. Your day will come if you are only patient. What is ten years? Why, a lifetime is little enough if, in the end, you've accomplished something. I know it's hard that you want money—so do I, for that matter—but money isn't everything, by a good deal."

Tan-Shin cracked with pleasure. At last he had found out what Helen wanted; he agreed with Jack that money was all that mortal need wish for, and, to him, nothing was more easily obtainable.

The two talked long in this way, Jack insisting that he would strive for only one thing in the future, and, as he rose to go away, he pointed at Tan-Shin.

"Helen," he said, "your little god may be all right, but hereafter my God is Money."

She was a very unhappy Helen who confided her grief to Tan-Shin after Jack went away.

"Oh, my little god, why can't you help me?" she said to him. "But you are a love-god, I suppose, even if you are so ugly, and a love-god won't do. It's only money he wants; just money, money, and that will be his ruin. You're laughing at me, and of course you can't understand, and you couldn't help, anyhow, if you did, and—I'm wretched!"

Somewhat abruptly she went away, leaving him wondering and perplexed. He certainly was not a love-god, and he failed to understand what possible use she could have for any such frivolous deity. Still, his way was quite plain; there was no question that money was what she wanted. So, while Helen slept, Tan-Shin exercised his chief attribute in her behalf and rejoiced to be at work again. Incantations that had never failed kept him busy all night, and he was so happy at his task that he put a little of his real feelings into the set grin of his mask.

"Why, you're smiling more than ever," Helen said to him the next morning. "I believe you're a bad little god, after all. Are you glad I'm so unhappy?"

No one but Tan-Shin knows how much he had to do with it, and he is given to complaining that the people of this new country have little faith in his powers. However, the fact remains that Helen received a letter by the first mail which changed her sorrow into joy. She read it eagerly, and there was a new light in her eyes when she finished.

"Poor Uncle Horace!" she said to herself, and then sent off a note to Jack by messenger.

"What do you think, my little god?" she confided to him afterward, "ten thousand dollars—all my very own. Who would have expected old Uncle Horace to remember me after all these years? And now Jack can have

He rose from his chair and began to pace up and down the room. "Don't think I'm not glad you have the money, Helen," he went on. "I am glad, glad of the chance it will give you to study, glad that you won't have to worry over ways and means any more; honestly glad, but it changes our relations absolutely."

"I don't know what you mean, Jack," she said with a sob.

"You do know what I mean," he answered, his voice softening as he saw the tears in her eyes. "What I have always meant, Helen, ever since we were kids; but you don't want me to be a cad, so we'll say no more about it."

"But Jack—"

"No, not a word," he interrupted; "some day, perhaps, but now it is impossible, and lots of things may happen in the meantime."

He sat down opposite to her, controlling himself with an effort. "Now, when will you sail?" he asked.

She made no answer and he went on: "I should like to have this studio when you go."

"I'm not going anywhere," she said positively.

"Nonsense!" he replied with a feeble attempt at cheerfulness. "You have wanted to go abroad ever since you were old enough to want anything, and now you're going! I'll look up the sailings to-morrow morning. Also, as I said before, I'd like to come here after you are gone—that is, if you don't mind."

"Of course, I don't mind, Jack, but—"

"There are no buts, little woman. You're going on the finest trip you ever had in your life, and what's more, you deserve it all. The little god and I will keep the place warm for you while you are away."

He reached for his hat and started for the door. "I am glad, for your sake, Helen, but you see the news came suddenly and has upset my plans a bit. You know what I've been counting on for a good many years." He stopped, hesitatingly, and then continued: "Well, I can't tell you now about it—but if it had only come the other way, that is, if I had the money—only you mustn't think I'm egotistic or not really glad—but it makes a lot of difference."

Jack talked on for a few minutes, becoming more and more unintelligible to Tan-Shin, who watched the entire proceedings with wonder, but Helen seemed to understand, although she cried softly to herself long after he had gone.

Late that night she came silently, all white in the darkness, with tears still in her eyes, very lonesome and unhappy.

"It's all because of the money," she whispered to Tan-Shin, "all because I have it and he hasn't. And he might have it if he wasn't so silly and proud. Still he does care for me, I know that now, and it's a great

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Tan-Shin was a little hurt because it was wholly evident that they had been talking a long time together before they ever thought of him, but at last Jack took him from his resting place and brought him to her. She seemed so happy and looked so radiant that he said that old Chinese word several times when she reached out to take him.

"I'm so glad you brought him," she said to Jack, holding Tan-Shin admiringly in front of her. "I'm sure he's a love-god now."

"Nonsense!" answered Jack. "I loved you long before you ever saw the old bird."

"Yes, but I never knew it till she came," said Helen, "and at any rate we must take care of him for luck."

"Oh, he's a lucky little beggar, all right," replied Jack, "and we'll take all kinds of care of him, but he didn't have anything to do with my loving you, and he put his arm about her."

Then Helen held Tan-Shin close to her and whispered in his ear: "You're my little god, anyhow, and I'm sure you are a love-god, which is the very best kind of a god to be."

Tan-Shin puzzled his brain over these words for a long time.

"It is strange," he concluded finally, "for I have always been a god of riches and scorned those gods of love, but in this new country we seem to have much in common."