

THE PALACE OF IVORY EYES

By Arthur James Hayes

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WHITE moonlight," said Kinzie Mitchell, "and wailing wind. It's queer, too, how those things affect a fellow 'way up there on the roof of the world. I've lain on the edge of one of the Kioo Long Sran ledges and looked down at the Dokpa camp fires and up at the stars, and after while, with the winds wailing in the valleys and moonlight flooding down the scarred blue faces of the higher crags, I couldn't tell which was which!"

Mitchell's face has the strange passivity that comes to Occidentals of long years in the Orient. It is bronzed by the winds that cry by night in the San Luen passes and whip the turbid waters of the Yare Tsangpo, until the Bho-Ka sampan men supplicate their fathers' gods. Years of staring into the slant eyes of the Mongol has given his own a perceptible oblique cast. The fiber arch he used to wear in his mouth, to depress the soft palate that his gutturals might the more nearly resemble the true Celestial's, has done its work well. Only his eyes are different, and only by the light in them does one know that he is not the tall, shaven pated Tartar that he appears.

His bronzed features are scarred with the knives that flashed by night in the Kara-Ulas trails, when the Mongols of S'ai Chiang tried to intercept the gold caravans from the mines of Jalung. It was unsuccessful, and the nugget-laden native mules plodded on their thousand mile journey, or stampeded wildly up the back passes, to be lost to the government coffers, and to carry down upon the heads of the finders the curses of the Dalai Lama and the monks of the ruby veils.

His left arm has shriveled and mummified from the elbow to the wrist, and he steadfastly avers that the spear that ran

THE roof of the world and the moonlit gorges of Lat Dayul are the setting for this story, as weird and thrilling a tale as man has conceived!

it through in Lat Dayul was poisoned with the orchid juice that makes the strange Ivory mummies on the tombs of the Karsang priests!

So when he stares with unseeing eyes at the mists of the far horizon I listen without interruption. Like most men who have seen much, he talks but little, nor will he brook questioning on the things he says. He has learned finality from the Whispering Prophet of the strange and distant Temple of the Stars and a fine disdain from the Silent Seer of Khotan, whose trances are as long as the moon's phases, and who scorns the puny minute of the white race, struggling uselessly in the sea of unchanging time.

I WONDER sometimes whether the affair of the Phantom Sedan wasn't a figment of dreams," he said, "one of those weird processions compounded out of the moonlight and the whispering winds and the flaming imminence of the planet-spangled sky! The silence is big and the spaces that the eye ranges through are appalling. It's a sort of anteroom to eternity, and one dreams big, grand dreams up there. I've been so lonely on the rock-girt trails that I've trailed my pack mule alongside of me, instead of behind, as is the time honored practice. And when a mangy Thibetan mule is company, a man is hard pressed!

"And I've seen as clearly as if they weren't built of the mists of my own

brain the white, shimmering robes of the Khal Liang Lama, who was killed in a fifth century schism, and now rides the spare horses of the lonely little cavalcades that bring the interdicted silks out of Khotan for the illicit opium that trends northward from India over the Ningtse hills.

"He's ridden at my side for hours, and I've pinched myself to be sure I was awake and thrust my hands through him and laughed and sung and cursed to break the spell! And then I've seen the moon over my shoulder and realized that it was merely a matter of lights and shadows in the narrow pass. Then I laughed again to find that the sweat was dripping from my face, despite the frost-laden wind that echoes the prayers of the Blind Lamas and the despairing shrieks of the mad Shu-Kans, the cliff hermits.

"It's a matter of where you are, of course. Plant me alongside of electric lights and white man's laughter, and I'm as incredulous as any man alive. But place me up there, where the wind never ceases its murmuring passage among the crags, where the sand ghosts dance in the moonlight and the ruined towers of dead civilizations poke their shattered turrets at the flaming night sky, and I am a child again, heeding the menace of the unpeopled gorges and pattering energetic Buddhist prayers in the clucking tongue of the Red Faces!

"I'd heard of the Phantom Sedan before I ever met it. And after my horse had shied to the edge of the cliff and crouched there, trembling, taut for the leap into space, I've stood up in my stirrups, the better to see within the silken curtains. What I saw within I always attributed in next morning's sunlight to another phantom of the lights and shadows and loneliness that breed strange fantasies.

"For a woman looked out at me—a wondrous white woman, who wore her yellow curls bound up beneath a great turban of pearls. She looked at me and smiled at my grotesqueness, for I was senna-ed and queue-ed until my own mother would have never glanced a second time. And partly from habit and partly from sheer terror I was pattering aloud the clacking, broken prayers of the Red Faces! I learned them from motives of caution and recited them in secret derision and without outward piety, and now, like the devil at orisons, I mouth them with the soulless grace of a parrot!

"So she smiled, disdainfully, with full red curving lips, that seemed purple in the moonlight, and the eight tall white figures that bore her passed, leaving to me only the memory of wide, dark eyes and curling lips and bare shoulders draped with golden chains in which glittered great uncut rubies, like drops of blood against her alabaster breasts.

"Then I had to kick my

prostrate coolies into their senses and start again.

"I asked about it, and was assured that it was a shadow, like the ghost of the Khal Liang lama. Fu Chang swore by all the heathen gods that once his mule had bolted right through it, and that it was only a misty cloud, smelling stately of tombs and dead men's bones. The Chinese are born liars, but their lies are usually rather expedient than fanciful. Among the yellow skinned devils are few artistic twisters of truth. The coolie will lie to spare his back the torture of the split bamboo, or to mulct one of a few brass 'cash.' But lies that have to do with the spirit world are seldom encountered.

"The red, honest sunlight made the whole thing laughable, and I relegated it to the long catalogue of unexplained things which the Orient parades to startle and amaze the transient Aryan. But from that day forward I was keen to collect all the rumors of the Phantom Sedan that began to be whispered in the Ninghia gold marts and the Bho-Kan villages. They were plentiful. They had to do with men mysteriously dead upon the trails, their eyes wide with a terror that was not engendered of mortal things; of mule caravans piled in battered heaps in the deepest gorges, where the jackals spurned gold casks and silk bales and opium packets to gnaw the rock-riven flesh; with internecine strife that threatened to disrupt the Dalun Yun monastery, because of the monks worshipping a white goddess instead of the fleshless ideals of the true Nirvana!

THERE things stop, with sourceless rumors multiplying, when chance and a choice offer on smuggled opium sent me to Darjeeling, to load under the none too watchful eyes of the British inspectors sundry concealed packets of fiber crystals. Weazened old Sing Fong, ostensible stool pigeon for the Chinese colony, helped me get the contraband inside the hollow pack saddles, whereon reposed commonplace English textiles and trinkets for a gold trading junket, and then made it known that he had a passenger for me.

"I hate passengers. Sing Fong met my protests smilingly. 'If the Favored of Heaven wishes,' he explained, 'he can with ease stampee an old and worthless mule off the Black Precipice. And if, perchance, the Red Foreign Devil is riding the careless brute the Favored of Heaven will be freed of further bother. But I, who have accepted gold from him to stop the ears of the accursed Brahman pigs who act for the police, cannot well refuse the honored compact!'

"And that Sing Fong's quaint concept of honor might be complied with I traveled north with Scott McRae. Nor did I mount him on a footsore mule that might be expeditiously jostled by Fu Chang, assassin unparalleled. In half a dozen words he had discounted my whole theory of elimination.

"Have you ever met," he asked, "anywhere in China a small frightened-looking white man with a dark-eyed, tall and fearless-appearing daughter?"

"I have," I responded. "Six years back, on the Alashan fringe of the Gobi Desert, he said he was in there for the Russian government to trace down sundry petroleum lake rumors that the Bear was frankly interested in. He rode into camp at sunset. Beside him, on a little white mule, rode a young girl, in the grotesque Suchin costume. But the turned leather and cumbersome garb could not entirely disguise the lithe slenderness of the supple young figure.

"She was the first white woman I had seen in seven years, and old as I was, the careless glance of her deep-fringed eyes sent the blood mounting beneath the senna stains that helped my Mongol make-up. They wanted cart-ridges and goat's milk. I pattered along



"They rode away again into the quiet darkness of desert night."