

1

I've spent a good deal of time puzzling over just how to recount the strange events of that autumn back in 1902. The difficulty's not solely with the mystery itself—though I doubt many have encountered one as tortuous—but also with the outlandish way I came to be involved. It might help to keep in mind Mr. Burns' cautionary words about the best-laid schemes of mice and men oft going awry. But even more essential is an acquaintance with my wife, that chasm of logic familiarly known as Emmie. If you haven't had that unique pleasure, the experience can be distilled to this: in Emmie's presence all laws of physics, and metaphysics (including the aphorisms of Scottish bards), are prone to mutation. So when *her* carefully laid scheme went awry, she got none of the grief and pain anticipated by the poet, but the murder she had craved all along.

When Emmie's cousin Charlie was married earlier that year in Buffalo, we had missed the wedding. In truth, we'd been asked to miss the wedding. Though not without reason. There's no denying that our own betrothal had proven a bit of a cataclysm for Charlie's fiancée, Catherine. It's a rather long story, but you might sympathize with poor Catherine on learning that the celebratory spirit of our wedding supper ended abruptly when Emmie named her father as the murderer of Charlie's. We quietly left town the next day.

That was two years before the present account, and apparently any lingering ill will had dissipated sufficiently that the couple accepted Emmie's invitation to visit us. As was her habit, she'd told me nothing about the matter until the evening before their arrival.

“Harry, I received a letter from Cousin Charlie.”

“Oh? How are he and Catherine getting along?”

“Fine.”

“And his mother?”

“Aunt Nell's fine as well.”

“Any news?”

“Only that he'll be arriving tomorrow morning.”

I set down the newspaper and looked over at her. She continued typing throughout the conversation, never glancing at me.

“In town on business?”

“No, I invited them to spend Labor Day with us.”

“Them?”

“Him and Catherine, and of course Aunt Nell.”

“Emmie, I haven’t had much work lately. How do you expect us to entertain them?”

“We’ve the money in the savings account.”

“Drained. As are both of yours.”

“Two of mine.... ‘Both’ is only used when the number is definite. And how do you know that?”

“I found your secret cache in the flour bin.”

“One of my secret caches. And what were you doing in the flour bin?”

“Doing an inventory. To make it easier for the fellows auctioning our goods after the inevitable bankruptcy. How many bank accounts have you in toto?”

“Remember, before we married, I told you how my father had taught me to spread my money among at least four banks?”

“Yes, but of course that was a lie....”

“Only that I had four accounts. But it wasn’t a lie in regard to my father. It was due to this forethought that he came through the panic of ’93 unscathed, and was subsequently able to acquire sole interest in his business. His former partner hadn’t been as prudent and was forced to liquidate.”

“What you mean is, he took advantage of his partner’s bad luck to buy him out at a time of depressed prices. It’s ironic that his disloyalty led to his working himself to death.”

“My father didn’t work himself to death.”

“That’s what both you and your mother told me.”

“*Drank* himself to death, dear. I assumed you saw through the euphemism. Of course, being a liquor wholesaler, it amounted to much the same thing.”

No one likes finding out his wife has an indefinite number of secret bank accounts. Nonetheless, when Emmie handed me three hundred dollars later that evening, my feeling was one of relief. She told me it was to be used solely in my capacity as host and that whatever remained after the visit should be returned to her. As it happened, all the theatre outings, expensive meals, and traveling about over the next several days ensured there was little likelihood I’d have anything left beyond spare change.

It was the evening of Tuesday, the 2nd of September, that Emmie told us she had a surprise in store. After a morning of sight-seeing, we'd spent the afternoon at Sheepshead Bay—losing sheaves of ready cash on the horses by covering the wagers of our guests but graciously declining any share of their winnings—and then gone to a Manhattan Beach hotel for an early dinner. So Emmie's news that her surprise would necessitate a late-evening trip across the bridge to Manhattan—our place being just above Prospect Park in Brooklyn—wasn't greeted with much enthusiasm. But, as we all knew, resisting Emmie's plans requires more energy than executing them.

We arrived at Park Row about quarter past ten. It had started misting sometime earlier and the damp streets had an eerie cast, with each lamp radiating its own little atmosphere. The perfect night for an expedition to Emmie-land.

She led us to an electric wagonette bearing the sign "Visit the Celestial Kingdom—Only \$5," and there introduced us to Mr. Yuan. He was a dapper, well-dressed Oriental fellow about my age. And there was nothing exotic about his salesman-like manner.

By now it was rather obvious what was afoot. We were going slumming, a popular New York pastime since time immemorial. And though most visitors came expecting it as their due, it seemed an odd choice of Emmie's for this Buffalo branch of the family. Especially given the fragile state of Catherine's nerves.

We were given a reminder of just how delicate they were when that evening's *Brooklyn Eagle* headlined an article about ongoing naval exercises "Montauk Attacked by Naval Enemy." The news that Long Island was under siege caused Cousin Catherine a great deal of distress. She grew pale, then recited something of Tennyson's about the blood-red blossom of war. (I only know it was Tennyson's because she took the time to tell us, immediately before swooning.)

As Charlie and I were helping the ladies board the wagon, a fellow rushed up and pushed his way past poor Catherine. Then, as if suddenly remembering his manners, he apologized. From then on he was downright convivial—joining our conversation, calling us by name, and quickly making us as weary of his company as we were of each other's.

He was an ordinary-looking fellow, of medium height, clean-shaven, and no older than forty. But the outfit he was wearing bordered on the clownish. His jacket combined bright yellow and red checks woven into a sort of parody of a tartan. His trousers were similarly colorful, but of a jarringly different pattern.

It was while assessing the interloper's wardrobe that I caught sight of a tough-looking egg watching us from just across the street. I had the feeling I knew his craggy face. He seemed to likewise recognize me and we exchanged perfunctory nods.

Mr. Yuan—Jimmy, he told us to call him—collected five dollars per head and announced that we were about to embark on our tour of Chinatown.

“You shall see just how the Celestials live! Both the good... and the bad...”

He spoke English like a native—better, really. And he put a healthy amount of drama into it. His depiction of life in Chinatown sounded not dissimilar to that of a cheap magazine I had read as a boy. It wasn't long after we'd left Park Row that I realized we were headed to the southwest, exactly opposite the direction of Chinatown. Not surprisingly, the out-of-towners failed to notice. As did Emmie. Of course, her grasp of geography was so tenuous it still confused her that from Brooklyn one traveled west to reach the East River.

We'd headed down one of the dark streets near the North River and then into an alley. The wagon finally stopped beside an old warehouse which I expect fronted onto West Street, the thoroughfare that ran along the waterfront. As we approached, two Chinese fellows who'd been napping on crates sprang to their feet. One picked up a lantern and the other said something in Chinese to Jimmy.

“Oh, no!” he announced in mock distress. “These men refuse to allow us to enter, unless you pay them one dollar each.”

“But we've already paid you for the five of us,” Emmie told him.

“Oh, this is an unexpected expense,” he assured her. “These men are merciless ruffians. We are in their power.”

From all appearances, they looked to be novice ruffians who would have gladly bestowed whatever mercies they had available if allowed to get back to their naps. But the late-comer to the tour was anxious to proceed and generously covered the cost for us all. Jimmy then led us inside and up some rickety stairs to a door marked with several brightly painted characters.

“Behold! The Joss House!”

It was a large room, carefully lit so your attention focused on a wooden figure seated on a sort of throne. There was a fellow sitting beside it and arrayed on the floor before him a number of candles and a jar of sticks. Beyond that little scene, everything was in darkness, as if we were in a theatre.

“Who would like to make a prayer to the joss? He will grant your wish... tell you your future...”

“How much?” I asked.

“Special price tonight, one dollar.”

Aunt Nell, who seemed to be warming to the show, made an offering. She was given a lighted candle and a bunch of sticks.

“You must light the incense and place it in the bowl before the joss,” Jimmy explained. “Then you make a prayer.”

“I wish to know what the future holds in store,” she told him.

Jimmy leaned down and took a small wooden slat from a jar before the joss. It had a single Chinese character on it, but apparently an especially articulate one.

“Oh, your future is very good, most auspicious. You will be very happy. But first you must go on a great adventure.”

The old joss knew how to please his supplicants, and Aunt Nell was thoroughly imbued with enthusiasm for the superstitious nonsense. Which it was, of course, even if later it did prove somewhat prescient.

Next, Emmie took a turn. She followed the same routine and Jimmy let her pull out her own wooden slat. She handed it to him and he puzzled over it for a good while. Then he consulted with the other fellow in Chinese. He seemed equally mystified. In time, they came to some sort of agreement and Jimmy turned back to Emmie.

“Be prepared for the unexpected,” he told her.

This was a little like warning the iceberg about its impending rendezvous with the steamship. When the latter was plunging to the murky depths, the former would be drifting away unscathed and unconcerned.

Jimmy moved us on to the far end of the room and there opened another colorfully decorated door.

“Behold! The Fan Tan Parlor!”

We entered another little theatre. In the center of the room, a single electric light hung over a gaming table that was manned by one of the fellows who’d extorted us at the entrance. He poured out a large pile of buttons and immediately covered them with a bowl. Then Jimmy attempted to explain the game.

“It’s very simple, really. Each player bets on a number from one through four, based on what he supposes the remainder will be when the total number of buttons is divided by four. Unless there is no remainder, in which case the winning number is four.”

Any game of chance loses its allure when reduced to a mathematical formula, but most at least offer an engaging diversion in the course of the fleecing. It took a good deal more salesmanship on Jimmy’s part before he roused any interest in the game. Luckily, he was a bottomless pit of flimflam.

I wasn’t sure how one cheated at fan tan, but took it as a given there was a way when Emmie was first to place a bet. Aunt Nell, still aglow from her encounter with the joss, was next to bite, and then the newcomer and Jimmy took the last two numbers. They played a round and Aunt Nell won—surprising herself and, apparently, Jimmy. He seemed to admonish the sleepy fellow handling the buttons.

They had another go and this time Emmie caught the dealer clumsily palming a button. Harsh words were exchanged. Jimmy protested his innocence, but the others were unconvinced. In an exaggerated display of pique he upset the table, sending buttons flying and the bowl crashing to the floor, which, in turn, sent Cousin Catherine flying into the arms of her husband.

“Perhaps we can go now?” Charlie asked.

“No, no. The best part is still to come!” Jimmy assured him. His pride may have been wounded at the gaming table, but the thick hide of the huckster heals quickly.

As he spoke, another fellow came into the room and joined our party. He stood back too far in the dark to see his features, but from his dress I took him to be another tourist. Jimmy greeted him in English, took his five dollars, and then led us through another door. This one unpainted.

The room beyond was lit subtly for effect, and yet well enough that a subscriber to *Harper’s Weekly* would recognize at once he had entered an opium den. Several men lay languidly in rough bunks sucking on long pipes. And just beyond, the requisite partially clad white woman wallowed in her depravity.

“Behold! The Opium Den!” Jimmy announced rather belatedly. “A place of sin, and intrigue....”

There didn’t seem to be much of either going on at the moment. And while I wasn’t sure what opium smelled like, I did recognize the odor of cheap tobacco. The colorfully dressed

member of our party had wandered over to the wallowing woman and said something. She whispered a response. Then one of the Chinamen jumped from a bunk, shouted something in Chinese, shot the interloper, and dropped through a trapdoor at the far end of the room.

The woman screamed, then cried out, “My poor husband, shot dead in his vain attempt to rescue me. Oh, what evil have I wrought?”

Catherine likewise screamed, and promptly lost what little of her composure remained.

“I had better take her home,” Charlie said. “You should come too, Mother.”

Aunt Nell declined, insisting she was still keen on seeing the remainder of the show.

Charlie gathered up the quivering Catherine and they departed post-haste.

I had no doubt that the shooting was staged and considered it confirmed when I recognized the scantily clad woman as my cousin Carlotta, partly from her facial features and partly from her distinctive voice, but primarily from her utter lack of talent. Though she has many positive qualities that endear her to her kin, there’s no denying she’s a third-rate vaudevillian who normally knew enough to steer clear of any part that demanded more than her feeble gifts could deliver.

Emmie had gone over to examine the corpse. “My god, he’s really dead!”

I muttered an “Oh, dear,” and then greeted Carlotta.

“Hello, Harry. What did you think?”

“Oh, very persuasive. If I hadn’t recognized you, I’d have rushed after the fiend who did in your late husband.”

“You always were gallant, Harry. Even as a little boy.”

It’s simple enough to jot down something Carlotta said, yet impossible to convey how she said it. Her voice has a tendency to change pitch mid-word. The two short sentences above involved such a variety of tones that you’d have thought they were delivered by a choral quartette—each voice allocated certain syllables, but none entrusted with three together. A more accurate rendition would be: “YOU always **were** gallANT, Harry. EVen as a LITTLE boy.” Keeping in mind that Carlotta’s **low** notes are delivered in a contralto, her normal ones in a soprano, and her **HIGH** notes in an ear-piercing attack that invariably frightens children. Since it would be difficult for everyone concerned were I to render all her dialogue as accurately, I’ll limit myself to occasional reminders.

“He really is dead, Harry,” Emmie insisted.

“Oh, dear,” I repeated.

Aunt Nell went over and dipped her fingers in what looked to be ketchup pooled on the corpse’s chest. “It’s still warm,” she said.

Then Carlotta took a dip. This time her scream was thoroughly convincing. “Oh my gawd, Jimmy. He’s really dead!”

Curious now, I verified it for myself. Then Emmie leaned down, gave me a peck on the cheek, and whispered, “Happy anniversary, Harry.

~~ *end of sample* ~~

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