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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

Contents of Summer Issue, 1932

A Battle Over the Tea-Cups

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

Chinese guile wins a victory as two generals meet over the tea-cups during the war in Manchuria

THE train was stopped just out of Mukden. Flying American and British flags hadn't done much good, though it was pretty certain that no harm would come to any one on the train. Word flew from compartment to compartment that the northern war lord, Wah Hsu-Liang, would presently board the train in search of some one. He was coming in person, to assure the foreign ladies and gentlemen that no harm would be done to any one on the train.

I was standing in the corridor, talking to a high-caste Chinese, who with a woman occupied the compartment next to mine, when the word went around.

"This is very annoying," I said. "Looking for some one, indeed!"

The Chinese smiled composedly and said, "There is no need for alarm, my dear sir. There will be only a short delay. You foreigners are constantly beset by visions of bloodshed. This is both very foolish and very bad for the nerves, as you must admit. We Chinese are like a big family, quarreling among ourselves, but we do not like bloodshed either, and refrain as much as possible from it. But shedding the blood of innocent foreigners is something we do avoid with all our hearts. Besides, be content, for even in the temporary absence of the Japanese guards who should be along the railroad, the war lord will be careful to shed no blood."

He paused to smile benignly at the woman, who was devilishly pretty for a Chinese, and who bowed her head a little and smiled back.

Then he continued. "And as for looking for some one, I am convinced it is so. As a matter of fact, Mr. Shaw, I think General Wah is looking for me. He does not love humble Mr. Lu-Gen, and he has a great hatred for the Mandarin Ming, which personage I also deign to be on occasion."

His speech had the unpleasant effect of making me exceedingly conscious of danger. I knew enough of Manchurian politics to realize that the elusive Mandarin Ming had on more than one occasion blocked the policies of General Wah, while Mr. Lu-Gen had also done his bit against the war lord. There might indeed be blood shed in the compartment next to mine. It depended, perhaps, upon whom the war lord asked for.

"But aren't you in grave danger?" I asked.

"That is possible," he said without a flicker of emotion. "Yet, it is believed that so long as man still has his head, danger is in the distance; it moves close only after man becomes frightened and loses the faculty for thought."

Here he turned to the woman at his side and said in Chinese, "Go now to the dining-car and bring tea, for the general will presently discover me, and perhaps he will not object to taking tea with me."

I retired to my own compartment, leaving the door open in the hope that I might be able to hear what went on between the general and my traveling acquaintance.

PRESENTLY General Wah entered the car. He was a tall, heavy man, with long, drooping mustaches not very well cared for. Hostile newspapers described

him most often in a Chinese phrase meaning "big man with the small brain." His eyes, I saw as he stared insolently into my compartment, were hard and sharp. He withdrew in a moment, and paused before the adjoining compartment.

My acquaintance did not give the general time to speak. "I dare to believe you are looking for me, General," he said in rapid Chinese. "I am humble Lu-Gen."

The general made no direct reply. Instead he turned and shouted orders for guards to post themselves at each end of the car and suggested none too politely that no one might leave his compartment until the general left the car. Then he turned and went into the compartment, leaving the door wide open.

That was a lucky break, for not only could I hear very distinctly what was going on, but I could also see what action centered around the small reed table my neighbor had set up, due to the position of a mirror on the corridor wall opposite Lu-Gen's compartment. The woman had returned with tea, and went about placing the cups.

"There are matters I wish to speak to you about," said General Wah without preliminary.

"Quite so," replied Lu-Gen in a soft voice. "But I dare to hope that you will take tea with me before we discuss these matters?"

"Tea I will take," the war lord said bluntly, "but it is not necessary to defer our discussion. Perhaps it will not be long." His voice had an ominous note in it.

The woman promptly poured tea, and cut a lime fruit in two.

"These matters," suggested Lu-Gen calmly.

The war lord smiled grimly and said, "On the twenty-seventh of the month just past you withdrew my store of ammunition from the vicinity of Kirin."

"Because, had it been discovered by the Japanese moving upon Harbin, it would have been confiscated. The ammunition is in my hands, awaiting your pleasure."

Lu-Gen's reply somewhat disconcerted the general. Before he could continue, Lu-Gen took from his pocket a small lacquer box, from which he shook a white powder into his tea. "I am under the impression that the general does not like sweetening in his tea?" he said, a smile touching his lips.

"Quite right," said the general shortly. "To go on," he continued, "on the first of the present month, you arranged for a large body of my troops to be held over at the Tungsi junction, which made it impossible for me to surprize Chansin on the following day as I had planned."

"That was done because I had knowledge that Japanese would fight against you."

"But the Japanese were in the far north."

"Ostensibly. But remember that surface peace often hides danger. Many Japanese were hiding near Chansin, in wait. It is desirable for them that you be removed."

The general was not faring well, but he continued to hurl accusation after accusation at Lu-Gen, who parried them with great skill. Presently the general said, "Will you be so good as to sign an order releasing my ammunition and stores from the place where you have hidden them?"

Lu-Gen looked at him expressionlessly, and said, "And if I do not desire to sign?"

The general's reply came like a bolt from the sky. "Then I am afraid we must execute your son, whom we have the great honor to have as hostage ever since we took him from your secret house in Chinchow a week past, and we must execute him in the desired fashion. I will send you his limbs, and his ears, and his

tongue, and also if you wish, his eyes, for you to look upon."

Lu-Gen continued to look at the general meditatively. Abruptly he said, "I will sign. But be careful that other things do not interfere. You are being watched by the Japanese. It will probably go ill with you when it becomes known that you have stopped this train."

"On the contrary, I have Japanese permission. They foolishly hoped I would spill blood."

"You are wise, General Wah." Whereupon Lu-Gen wrote out the desired order.

At the same moment, the woman, undoubtedly at a sign from Lu-Gen, dropped the tea-pot, and in the instant that the general's head was turned, Lu-Gen dropped something into the general's cup of tea. It was clumsily done, and the general had seen it from the corner of his eye. The two Chinese faced each other over the tea-cups, the general's expression grim.

LU-GEN broke the tense silence. "Shall we drink, General?" he asked, bending courteously forward.

The general nodded curtly, and Lu-Gen lifted his cup to his lips.

"Stay," said the general crisply. "We drink together."

"If you will thus honor me."

"And I will drink the cup you have prepared for yourself, and you will drink that you have prepared for me."

Lu-Gen raised his eyebrows in astonishment. Then immediately an expression of pain crossed his face. In a low voice, he said, "My ancestors writhe in torment at your unvoiced accusation, General."

"You will drink with me as I have said," snapped the general.

Lu-Gen bowed. "Very well," he said gently, and took the cup from the general's hand, and the general took his.

Together they raised the cups and drank the tea. Lu-Gen's face was white and strained, but the general was smiling, his white teeth gleaming from beneath his straggly mustache.

"And my son?" asked Lu-Gen weakly, sinking back with closed eyes.

"He will be sent safely home, as I have promised. It is not a custom of mine to break a promise—even if it is made to Lu-Gen, who will soon, I hope, be no longer my enemy." His inference was unmistakable.

Lu-Gen clutched spasmodically at his bosom. The general had risen and was staring down at him in satisfaction. "You have won another battle, General," said Lu-Gen in a low voice. "Allow me the honor of complimenting you."

The war lord smiled sardonically and left the compartment, pulling the door shut after him. In a little while the train began to move. What I had seen was like a melodrama. I kept my eyes fixed upon the closed door of the adjoining compartment, expecting something to happen. But nothing whatever happened; so I got up and knocked gently on the door.

"Can I be of any assistance?" I asked in Chinese.

LU-GEN himself threw open the door. He did not look as if he had just taken poison. Had I jumped to conclusions? He smiled broadly at the expression on my face and said, "Mr. Shaw appears surprized. I observed you watching and listening in the mirror before your own door, and hope you were sufficiently entertained by our unedifying conversation. It is not often that you sea deadly enemies in friendly converse."

"But I thought . . . I saw you drop something in the general's cup——"

"Surely you did not dream that I was trying to poison him?"

"What else could I think?" I said lamely.

"True. The Occidental mind has fancies. I merely dropped sugar into the general's cup."

"And into your own?" I asked.

"A sleeping-powder," he said, smiling at my incredulity.

I smiled foolishly, and felt very incompetent. "And do you think he will release your son?" I asked.

"My son?" asked Lu-Gen, appearing surprized. Remembering abruptly, he replied, "Oh, you accept too much of the general's patter. My son is quite safe in Shanghai. The general, coming upon a youth resembling him and arrayed in his garments in my house in Chinchow, foolishly took him to be my son. He is a big man, the general, but there is no room for thought. He jumps to conclusions, a faculty I have noticed also in you Americans."

He smiled at me, and began to close the door. As I turned away, he said, "But even he who jumps to conclusions may often strike the truth, though he follows not its devious paths. Some day soon we shall perhaps speak of the general in the past tense."

A day later, the Peiping papers announced that the war lord of the north, General Wah Hsu-Liang, had died in his sleep the night before.