

May 21

Action Stories of All Kinds

ARGOSY

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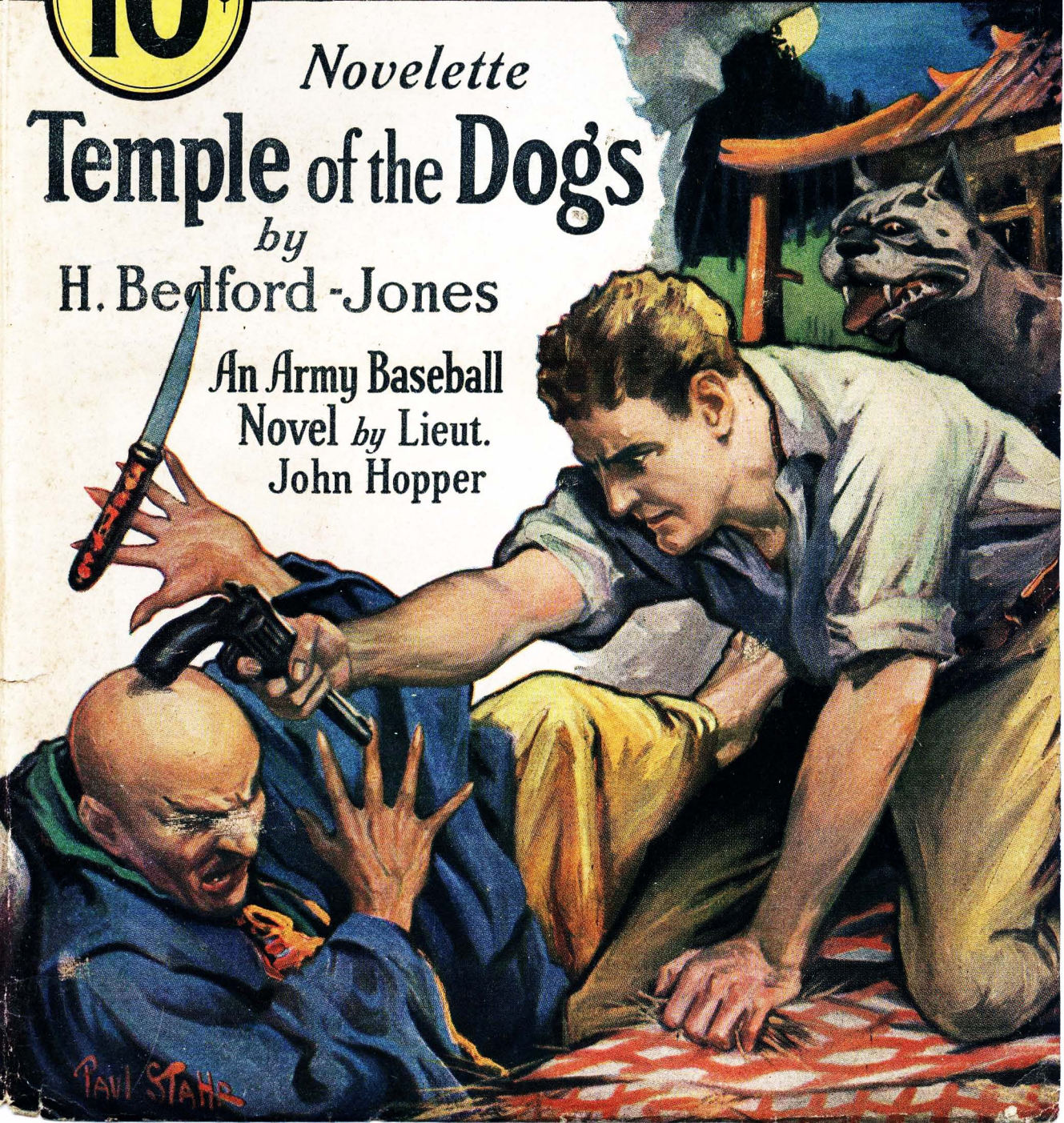
Novelette

Temple of the Dogs

by

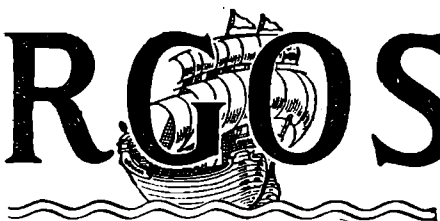
H. Bedford-Jones

An Army Baseball
Novel *by* Lieut.
John Hopper



PAUL STAHR

ARGOSY



Action Stories of Every Variety

VOLUME 229

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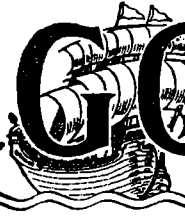
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SATURDAY, MAY 21, 1932

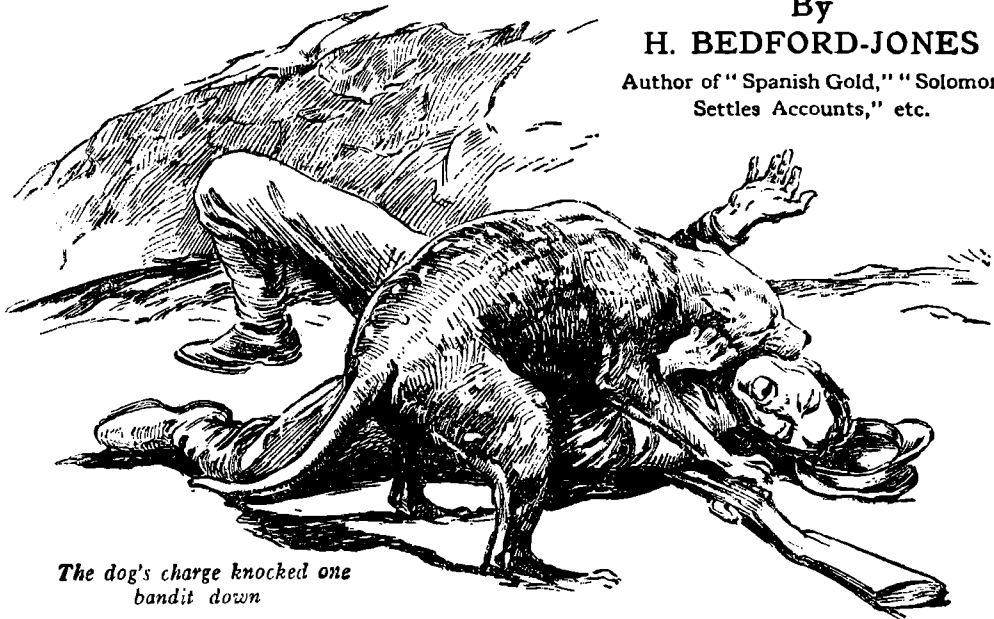
NUMBER 6

Temple of the Dogs

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES

Author of "Spanish Gold," "Solomon Settles Accounts," etc.



The dog's charge knocked one bandit down

Mystifying and dangerous was the place of refuge Gordon sought when Chinese bandits pursued him

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

BANDIT CHASE.

A SHARP and angry rifle-crack whipped out. The sound of the shot echoed up and rolled among the lonely hills and was lost, mournfully. Gordon felt his horse quiver. With a start of dismay he knew

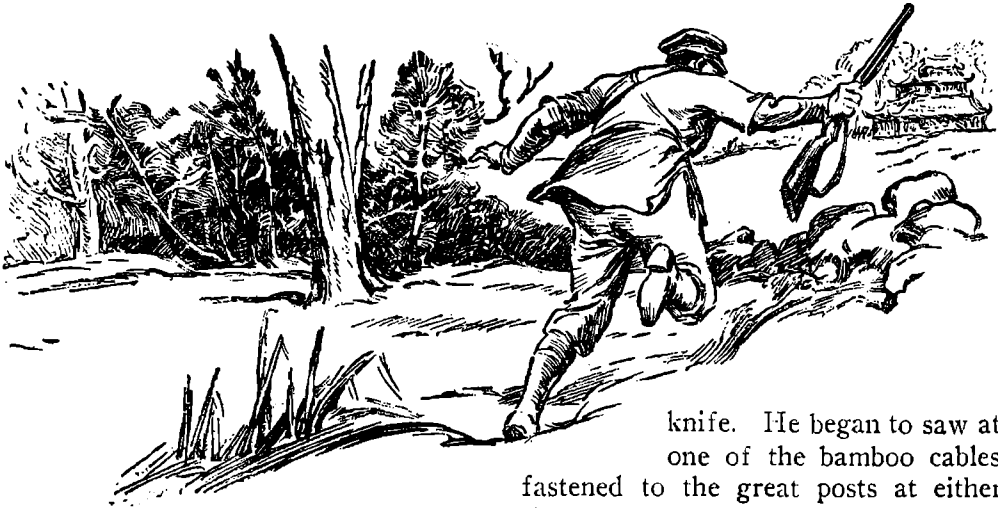
the animal was hit. The little Yunnanese pony had labored manfully, but now the end was come.

They were not far behind—two or three in the lead, others trailing, horses and mules. All around stretched the China hills, closing in the horizon with peaks, giving no sign of human habitation.

Directly ahead showed a deep, wide chasm in the earth, a gorge that split the hills asunder. It was crossed by a suspension bridge of bamboo that curved down and then up again to the other edge, a narrow, swaying little bridge. Gordon drove in his spurs and struck it full tilt. He had no weapon except the pistol in his holster, a rather useless thing against a horde of Chinese bandits.

hanging low, blood coming from the ugly wound in its barrel.

Rolling over, leaping to his feet, Gordon looked back. He was caught now, as the shrill yells of triumph testified. Half a dozen of the bandits were on the bridge, the others had halted. The frail structure swung, bounced about in the air. With a wild surge of exultation, Gordon ran to the bridge-head, hauling out his heavy-bladed



knife. He began to saw at one of the bamboo cables fastened to the great posts at either side.

The bridge swayed and swung, bounced horribly. Nostrils wide with terror and death, the little horse plunged ahead in utter madness. The death below was no worse than the death behind. The pursuers slowed up a bit as they struck the swinging, swaying bridge, and lost ground. Another shot, and another, the slugs going wild, screaming overhead.

Bullets whistled about him, sang in the high air. The twisted withes parted like paper under the keen steel, the strain on the bridge aiding his work. With a jerk, one cable went out. The bridge lurched. There was a terrific scream as one of the riders pitched over into the abyss. The others halted, dismounted, started back in swift terror.

Gordon neared the farther side, felt the animal stumble, caught his breath sharply. But the hill pony was sure-footed, recovered, went staggering on for the last dozen feet. Gaining the solid ground at last, the poor beast halted abruptly, pitching Gordon from the saddle, and stood quivering, head

Already Gordon was at the other cable. A snap, a straining tug, a rending crack. It parted. The bridge swung down and away. A chorus of shrill and awful yells arose for an instant, then was silenced. Over the tree-tops below swung the long, narrow bamboo structure, but it was now empty.

"And that," observed Gordon, "is that."

Heedless now of the yelling, shooting men on the farther bank, he turned to his horse. The animal had sunk down, but it now lifted its head. In those agonized eyes Gordon read a message he could not pass by. He took out his pistol, put it to the head of the poor brute, fired. The head sank down, and a trickle of crimson ran out in the yellow dust of the trail.

Regaining his sun-helmet, Gordon ran his fingers through his crisp yellow hair. He was straight-limbed, tall, high-boned of feature, his blue eyes striking out like a sword, his lips compressed in a thin scarlet line. It was only half an hour ago that this party of wandering bandits had picked up his trail, undoubtedly by chance. The second group of bandits in two days!

On the previous morning he had left Liching, on the river just below the rapids, with a caravan of supplies for the silver mine that he managed. Late in the afternoon, bandits struck his coolie train, shooting indiscriminately, but with deadly accuracy.

His guards fled at the first shot, as usual. Gordon escaped, thanks to his horse, and had wandered by lonely hill trails ever since, utterly lost. How far away was he from Fanchow? In which direction did it lie? He had no means of learning.

The few people he met had never heard of Fanchow. They never heard of anything that lay more than ten miles from their homes. However, there had been very few folk: He had passed through two villages of the dead, raided by bandits, destroyed, with rotting corpses strewn about the streets. All this district had suffered horribly from masterless men who roved the trails.

For one thing Gordon was thankful—that he was in Yunnan. Here, even

up toward the Szechuan border, rice was almost unknown, and the ever-present Yunnan potato formed the universal food of the people. Bundled up in his coat, tied to his saddle, were potatoes he had taken from abandoned hillside fields, enough food, of a sort, to secure him against want for days to come.

He had little else, however; his pistol and a spare clip, pipe, tobacco and matches, some money, and his stout-bladed knife. And now he was afoot, and the sun was fast drawing to the western peaks, with another shelterless night in prospect.

With a shrug, he filled his pipe, lighted it, swung the coat and bundle of potatoes over his shoulder, and started off at a brisk, long-limbed stride. He gave no more heed to the group of bandits, whose pursuit was now cut off—at least for the present. Directly ahead of him was another gorge and another swinging bamboo bridge, though not a long one. Coming to it, he crossed, grimacing as the swaying withes bounced beneath him. At the farther side he halted, took out his knife, and cut away the bridge. That would settle any pursuit, at least temporarily.

Ahead, the trail swung out of sight around the long hill-flank. Gordon strode on. He was unshaven, stiff, bruised, more badly in need of water than anything else. In China, whose notions of sanitation are even older than its ancient culture, safe drinking water is very hard to find. What wells Gordon encountered, to judge from the putrefying corpses about them, had been poisoned as a futile protection against bandits.

Thus he was overjoyed when, a half-mile farther on, he saw ahead of him a little stone bridge crossing a tiny

bubbling stream that plunged down the mountainside.

APPROACHING this bridge, he saw at one side a large tablet, like a grave-stone on end, whose chiseled characters told the world that this was the Black Dragon spring. The stone did not look ancient, and had doubtless been erected by some pious soul in more happy times, in order to gain merit.

Below, off to the right, the little rivulet leaped out and was gone down the sharp descent. Above, to the left, brush and trees ascended the hillside thickly. Gordon turned from the trail and with a sigh of relief lowered his precious burden to the dust. His blue eyes danced with delight at sight of the clear, fresh water.

"Venerable Black Dragon, ancient maternal ancestor, I salute you!" he exclaimed gaily, in his most ceremonious Mandarin. "Since I'm about to spend the night with you, I thank you for water, firewood, and shelter."

With a laugh he advanced to the stream, knelt at the trickle of water and drank from his cupped hand.

He rose, and sent quick glances around. Ahead on the road were only bare hills. Here he had good water, firewood, and a berth among the trees if he desired it. No better couch could be desired than a bed of pine branches, properly trimmed and laid. A splotch of color close by drew his eye, and he found himself looking at the reverse side of the stone tablet near the bridge. Upon it were painted four ideographs in bright, fresh vermilion — *ho yang feng yueh*.

Gordon translated them mechanically, if a bit freely.

"'Spend happy time here drinking best quality wine.' The Black Dragon

Inn, by any chance? The invitation is at least promising, but the tavern is absent. If we—"

He checked himself abruptly. As he turned, he saw a man standing close beside him, at the edge of the trees and brush. An old man it was, head shaven, in the robe of a Buddhist monk, rosary about his neck. The face was indescribably wrinkled by age.

"Honorable foreign devil," said the monk, in Mandarin which Gordon understood far better than the local dialect, "your salutation to the Black Dragon was heard. Since you were thus polite, I was sent to bring you to the shelter and firewood for which you gave thanks."

Gordon stood motionless, thinking hard and fast.

Had this old monk been hidden among the trees, and heard his exclamation as he halted? That was possible, even probable—yet he had not spoken loudly, and he could have sworn that no one was about, for the brush was not so thick as to hide any figure close by. This monk appearing out of nowhere might have come from some temple, of course, but there was no temple within sight. Even so, monks did not offer shelter, though they readily granted it, to chance travelers.

"Whence come you?" asked Gordon, uneasily. "There is no temple near here."

"There is a shrine," said the old monk, and now Gordon saw that his hands shook with age, and his voice was tremulous. "It is called the temple of the Black Dragon spring, though it has another and more ancient name unknown to the countryfolk."

"How far am I from Fanchow?"

"About fifteen *li*," came the prompt response. "The road is dangerous, however, and you should not attempt it

after dark. You are welcome at the shrine."

Gordon was, quite obviously, without weapons. His pistol-holster was under his shirt, and therefore out of sight entirely. Perhaps for this reason, he thought, the monk was not afraid of him. He nodded toward the tablet with its vermilion sign.

"What does that mean?"

"It is an invitation," said the monk. "Those who have an honest heart and superior mind are made welcome. There is *shaosing chiu*, old South China wine, that has ripened for ten full years. Come with me."

As Gordon knew, this expression was applied to any fermented or distilled liquor. Actual wine of this age was almost unknown in China, where "old" wine has perhaps a year or two, no more, to its credit.

Harmless as the old monk so obviously was, delighted as Gordon was to find himself located comfortably for the night, and to be set aright on his road with morning, something gave him pause. In the voice and air of this monk was an undertone of wheedling which disturbed him vaguely. Those four characters painted on the stone tablet were certainly singular.

THEN, abruptly, Gordon started, and wondered if something were wrong with his eyesight. The old monk stooped and picked up a staff of gnarled wood from the ground at his feet. The odd thing about this was that no staff had been there a moment before. Gordon could have sworn to it.

Leaning forward on the staff, showing a bent figure, the monk spoke again. Perhaps he, too, might be a trifle uneasy about this chance stranger; his words testified as much.

"I am named Hung Shui," he ob-

served. "I am an old man, but this is the first time I have ever beheld a foreign devil on this road—more, a foreign devil who could talk my language! More, a foreign devil alone, without servants, who knew not where he was."

Gordon laughed, suddenly realizing that the old monk had good cause for wonder. Perhaps he had been mistaken about that staff, after all.

"I have been lost since yesterday," he said. "Bandits scattered my servants and I barely escaped from them. Half an hour ago I barely escaped other bandits; my horse was killed. Here I am, with potatoes for my supper. You said this shrine had another name. What is it?"

The old monk drew down his wrinkled brows. His eyes were sharp and keen enough, despite his age.

"You would not know," he said with a trace of disdain. "How would a foreign devil ever have heard of a woman named Jade Bracelet?"

Gordon again broke into a laugh.

"Old man," he said, "you are named Red Water, which is an odd enough name. But the woman you just mentioned, Yang Kwei Fei, lived nearly twelve hundred years ago, and certainly you are not old enough to have seen her!"

Hung Shui started. "So you have heard, then, of that ancient empress!" he exclaimed sharply. "The friend of Li Tai Po, Tu Fu and the other great poets? Honorable sir, accept the apology of this humble slave. Accept the humble shelter of my poor roof, I entreat you. Sleep within these walls, which were erected by the Emperor Ming Wang. And to-night, at the hour of the rat, you shall see the most beautiful woman in the world."

Now Gordon was tempted to think

the old monk crazed by his solitude, and yet there was a connected string of sense to his remarks. Yang Kwei Fei, wife of Ming Wang, was like Helen of Troy in Chinese tale and history—the most beautiful of women.

“You have not yet told me the ancient name of this shrine, Hung Shui,” said Gordon.

“It is the shrine of Yang,” he responded, “for once this was the little hill-village of Ma Wei, where she was killed and buried. Now only the shrine remains. Come, for the sun is at the western rim of heaven.”

Gordon picked up his coat and the potatoes. He could not make up his mind whether this old monk were crazed or sane, but at least shelter offered for the night, and in any case the old fellow was too shaky with age to be a menace. Even as he turned to follow the other, however, he again felt a twinge of warning—perhaps from the peculiar flash in the eyes of Hung Shui.

“Is that treasure you have wrapped in your coat?” asked the monk. Gordon nodded, and opened his bundle to show the potatoes.

“Food is treasure, old man, just now.”

Hung Shui blinked, and strode at the brush and trees ahead. He waved his staff. Gordon, close behind him, was rather surprised to find a path opening out ahead—a path he had not observed from the road. It was a well-worn but lately disused trail, paved with stone in the ancient fashion of Chinese roads, winding up the hill flank in the obvious intent of throwing off the devils who are always at Chinese heels but who cannot travel except in a straight line. Railroad builders have had their troubles in China.

The trees towered high overhead in

the sunset, great forest beauties untouched by the ax for centuries. As the trees grew larger, the brush underneath thinned out to nothing. Presently he beheld, ahead of them, the outer gate of a temple, guarded by two broken, ancient stone dogs.

The paved walk led on to another gate, and beyond appeared the mass of a building. They passed the final gate; this, like the outer one, was guarded by a great stone dog on either side, and Gordon noted that these stone dogs were spotted in a peculiar manner, no doubt by lichens or moss, but he did not pay them any attention, at the moment.

Now the temple itself lay before them.

CHAPTER II.

A SAVAGE PROTECTOR.

HIS first look at this structure gave Gordon a quick sense of desolation, age-old ruin, complete abandonment.

The temple building, or rather shrine, was of stone in the old Chinese fashion—that is to say, a skeleton was built of huge beams to bear the weight, and the walls were filled in with stone. Being upon the hillside, the front terrace was raised high, giving the effect of a blank wall broken in the center by wide ascending steps. Down these steps, from an arched opening halfway up, descended the waters of the spring, to trickle away at the bottom.

The great age of the building was evident at first glance. The stone wall and steps in front were broken and ruined in places, were covered in great patches with moss and lichens, and a huge tree had grown completely

through at one corner of the terrace, centuries ago.

"You don't keep your shrine in very good repair, Hung Shui," observed Gordon as the old monk paused at the foot of the steps, leaning on his staff and panting for breath.

"When there is need, it is in good enough repair," was the response. "Six hundred years ago it was restored and refurnished by a pious mandarin of Fanchow. Nowadays there are so many robbers and bandits about, everything is so unsafe, that I have put away everything of value, and only decorate the shrine when some superior man like yourself visits us, or on a day of feasting. To-day is one of those days. It is the festival of Yang, the day she was killed. Do not be surprised, however, if you find only bare walls up above. Soon you will see them otherwise."

On the outside of each wide stone step—and the steps were worn in grooves by the straw sandals of uncounted pilgrims, across the centuries—was another fu-dog, such as had guarded the gate entrances, but of smaller size.

These had been carved from marble. Several were broken or vanished, but Gordon noted at the moment, with surprise and admiration, that they had been chiseled from black marble having white spots, so that each of the little black marble creatures presented a white face to ascending visitors. It was typically Chinese work, the carving excellently done.

At the stair-head, the terrace appeared, a good ten feet wide, but exceedingly ruinous. Grass and weeds grew between the marble slabs of paving, many of them were broken, and the tree at the right had upheaved the slabs around it. A marble balus-

trade, once delicately carved, had in large measure vanished altogether. Fallen roof-tiles littered the terrace.

AGAIN old Hung Shui paused for breath, and Gordon looked with undissembled interest at the building in front of him, red in the sunset glare. The central hall, twenty feet in length and on this side unwalled and open, was absolutely bare. The altar or platform held not even an image of Buddha, not even a memorial tablet. There was nothing. On either side of this central hall were wings holding added chambers, entered through the hall. On the left side of the building and over the hall, the roof-tiles of red were largely broken or gone. Those on the right, where the tree beside them had served to shelter them, were mostly intact. Gordon turned to the old monk with a frown. "Have you any food, old man?"

"I live only on roots and herbs," answered Hung Shui. "There is the wine that I promised you, and I will get it in a moment."

"Then I'll cook my own supper," and Gordon lowered his improvised sack. "Where can I build a fire?"

"Here."

The monk struck down with his staff. Gordon saw that one of the marble slabs was gone, and where it had been was a square of dirt and ashes indicating former fires. He stared at it, wondering that he had not observed it before. His first impression had been that the platform of marble, though shattered and cracked, had been, nevertheless, intact.

"Inside the hall," and the monk pointed to the entrance, "you will find wood stacked up. Help yourself to what you will. In the chamber on the right is a sleeping-mat. It is yours. It

is a new one left here last month by a visitor. The chamber is yours."

"Will you join me in my meal?" asked Gordon.

With a shake of his head, the other moved away, passing into the hall and turning to the left. When Gordon followed, the monk had disappeared into the half-ruined chamber or rooms on that side.

Inside the entrance, as the monk had said, was a great stack of wood. Anxious to get at his meal before darkness, Gordon fell to work at once, hauling out the tinder-dry wood, getting a fire started on the indicated spot, and laying his potatoes in the embers with a covering of earth as he built up the fire above. It took him back to boyhood days, when the "gang" had roasted potatoes in the back lot, and he chuckled at the memory. Yet, despite his interest in this adventure, he wondered why he had not noticed this fire-blackened square of earth on first reaching the terrace.

"Must be getting old and careless," he reflected. "Usually I don't miss things. Then there was the path up here, which I hadn't seen, and that crooked staff lying on the ground—hm! I wonder if the old boy isn't a bit dotty?"

His first impression of an unbalanced brain on the part of the aged monk returned and would not be denied. Assuredly there was nothing to denote what the temple was or had been, except a few of the eight sacred Buddhist emblems carved here and there. Probably it was some long-abandoned hill temple or shrine, of which thousands exist in China. The old monk had taken it for his own abode, had given it a name and story, had peopled it from the figments of his fluttering imagination. Well, at all events,

the old chap was harmless and might prove an amusing companion.

GORDON donned his coat again, reached for his pipe, and uttered an exclamation of dismayed irritation. He remembered now. When he knelt at the trickle of water to take a drink, he had set down his pipe, and had left it there. Still, he wanted a look at the room he was to occupy for the night, and had best glance over it now, before the darkness died out.

He turned into the temple. On the right, the doorway going from the central hall was wide and unclosed by any curtain. He advanced to it and peered into the room beyond. This proved to be large; the earthen floor was clean, the roof unbroken.

Before him stretched a large straw sleeping mat, such as the Yunnanese habitually use for beds; it looked new and fresh, to his delighted surprise.

A small doorway at the left showed there lay a room or rooms beyond. Gordon crossed to it and stooped. He found himself looking into what once had been a small, square room, with no other opening in its walls. Now it was quite roofless, the walls were half destroyed, stones and debris littered the floor. In one corner an old tattered mat was flung over what appeared to be a pile of round stones, and at the moment Gordon paid it no heed.

More than satisfied with his shelter for the night, he returned to the terrace. There was no sign of his host. Pausing to replenish the fire, he hastened down the steps and retraced the way he had come, following the path. As he passed the inner entrance gate, he flung a gay wave of his hand at the two huge dogs of stone, so curiously patched and spotted with lichens, which guarded it.

"Cheerio, old boys!" he exclaimed cheerfully, whimsically. "You take good care of me to-night, and if I get safe home to-morrow I'll come back here next month and scrub off your patches. That's a promise, so if you want a good clean-up, do your duty. See you later."

Chuckling at his own whimsy, and more than half determined to keep this fantastic vow if he did get safe home, Gordon hastened on toward the road. When at length he came to where the brush and trees thinned out, with the road just below him, a glance showed him that it was empty. The sun was behind the western peaks, but daylight would linger yet a little while.

It so happened that the path led up from the brookside, by the bridge, and not from the road itself. Thus, as Gordon came down beside the water, he had the little stone bridge just ahead of him, and looking down, saw his pipe lying where he had left it. He went to it, and had just picked it up, when he stiffened.

A voice had sounded, apparently at his very side.

"Did you not hear a step?" it said, in Mandarin.

"One might hear anything in this place," said another voice, although no one was in sight. "It is a place of devils, I tell you! Every one knows it. Let us get out of here quickly, or we shall be dead like all who come here."

The hair rose on Gordon's neck; for an instant he thought those voices must be coming out of the very atmosphere around him, and he was frankly startled. Then he caught a scramble and scrape of feet, and two men who had been drinking on the other side of the stone bridge came up on it and stood gawking down at him from over the parapet.

On the instant, Gordon realized they were two of the band who had followed him, for they wore the same red-striped caps of Yunnanese soldiers, and he saw recognition in their eyes as their rifles went up.

"There is the foreign devil!" said one. "I knew we would find him—"

Gordon saw that he was caught beyond escape. Those rifles would drill him a dozen times before he could reach the trees, and a move toward his pistol would be fatal.

But, at this instant, occurred an amazing thing.

THERE was a cackle of laughter from the edge of the brush. Gordon glanced up behind him, and saw the old monk Hung Shui standing there. The fellow must have followed him. Then, with a crash, an enormous dog came leaping and bounding from the brush—a huge creature, uttering a snarling growl of wild ferocity as it hurled itself forward. From the two bandits burst one shrill yell of terror. The foremost swung his rifle, fired point-blank at the savage beast, and missed. Next instant the dog had him by the throat, pulled him down, and from the bridge came frightful sounds that made Gordon's blood run cold.

The second bandit had whirled and taken to his heels. He was running down the road, shriek upon shriek bursting from him, and so disappeared in a whirl of yellow dust. The dog, its chops slavering red, appeared again from the bridge, and with a leap and a scramble, was gone crashing up among the trees and brush.

But Gordon stood stock still, stricken with the utmost amazement. For this dog was of a queer whitish color and was spotted over with darker patches—exactly like the stone dogs

guarding the temple approach up above!

Plucking out his pistol, thinking this must be some wild extravaganza of his imagination, he went up to the road, and halted there. The body of the soldier-bandit lay on the bridge, his throat ripped out. This was real enough, and no mistake. A cackle of laughter came again from old Hung Shui.

"The dog is well trained, foreign devil! Come and get your old wine, and fear him not."

Gordon did not reply. He took a step forward, but the bandit was dead, beyond any help. He looked about, after a moment, and saw that the monk had disappeared. With a perplexed grunt, Gordon followed slowly, but on gaining the path saw no sign of the monk ahead.

"The old devil probably slips through the trees like an eel," he thought, vexed. "But—what about that dog? Where did it come from?"

In no way given to superstition, Gordon yet felt a singular eerie sensation as he recalled the appearance of the spotted dog, following so closely on his laughing promise to those stone fu-dogs. However, he shook off the feeling. When he approached the temple gate and saw the two old stone dogs sitting at either side, the solid reality of them, their cold, age-worn masses of stone, gave him quick shame.

"It's a cinch you boys didn't come alive, anyhow," he muttered. "That old rascal no doubt keeps a dog who looks like you. Damn it, my nerves must be getting jumpy if I'd imagine such a thing even for an instant!"

He could not help thinking, however, that it was a bit odd he had seen or heard nothing of any dog about the place, previously.

Regaining the terrace, he threw some dry wood on the embers of his fire. Twilight was at hand by this time; the night promised to be clear and cold.

The firelight flickered up, and fell upon the approaching figure of Hung Shui, who held in one hand the familiar double gourd of China, usually known as the pilgrim's bottle. This he set down by the fire, and his sharp old eyes peered at Gordon.

"Here is the old wine," he said. "May you enjoy it ten thousand years! This fire must be out and the embers scattered by the hour of the rat. What else can I bring you?"

As Gordon knew, the hour mentioned was the two-hour period from eleven to one.

"It will be out long before that," he answered cheerfully. "Have you any salt? And I'd like a lantern for my chamber, and something to keep me warm. I'll be glad to pay you well for your hospitality."

"That is as it may be," said the querulous voice of the monk.

He turned away and shuffled off. Gordon raked out one of his potatoes, tested it with the point of his knife, and shaking his head, replaced it.

PICKING up the gourd bottle, Gordon examined it and found it half full. He tasted it, and found it to be the familiar "samshu" or Chinese brandy. He whistled softly at the size of the drink proffered him. As this liquor is nearly fifty per cent alcohol, he had enough here to put anybody down for the count—and not to finish it off would be an insult to his host.

Thinking quickly, he left the firelight, descended the wide stone stairs to the little arch whence gushed out the

waters of the spring, and emptied most of the brandy out. He refilled the gourd, after draining what remained of the liquor, with the spring water, and came back to the fire. The brandy had a peculiar tang, he noticed, and it required a long swig of the water to take the taste of it from his mouth.

As he set down the bottle, the old monk appeared, carrying one of the ordinary cheap lanterns of split bamboo and paper, with the vermilion *teng-lung* or "lantern light" painted on its side. Setting this down, the monk produced a twist of cotton.

"Here is salt and a lantern, honorable sir," he said, making no reference whatever to the recent happening at the bridge. "If my dog approaches you, do not insult him and he will do you no harm. I have put two or three skins on your mat, for warmth. Do you desire to see the most beautiful woman in the world to-night?"

"Eh? I thought you'd forgotten about that," said Gordon, with a grin. "No, thank's. I'm dead tired, and wouldn't go a step out of my way to see all the houris in your paradise."

The monk regarded him for a moment as though irritated by his light manner. Gordon, looking at him, noticed something he had not previously seen, thanks to the way the firelight now fell upon the old man. In that shaven head were lightly burned three holes.

Therefore, Hung Shui was not a Buddhist at all, but a Taoist.

This was something else again—quite something else. The monk turned and departed with no further speech. Gordon thoughtfully raked his potatoes from the fire, put on more wood for warmth, and moved back against the fragments of the marble balustrade to enjoy his meal.

"If your dog comes monkeying around here, he'll get insulted and then some," he reflected none too easily. "A man-killer, eh? And you're a Taoist. Hm!"

Gordon had read and heard a good deal about the Taoist priests; who, as priests, may be all very well in their way, but who undoubtedly have a bad name among those of other faiths. Rightly or wrongly, the Taoists are reputed to be masters of magic. Not the ordinary magic of trick and illusion, but a deeper and more sinister art. Gordon had heard a thousand stories of their powers along this line, but had never encountered any startling examples of it personally.

"This old vulture probably is no magician," he reflected, "but he's a bit off and no mistake. And if he's a Taoist, that's no recommendation for his character. However, he's plainly done his best to make me comfortable, so that's that. What was it that soldier down there said about a place of devils, and men dying who came here? Looks as though the Black Dragon had a bad reputation in these parts. Hm! If I'd drunk all that samshu, I'd certainly be dead to the world in an hour's time!"

His frugal meal over, his appetite appeased, he enjoyed a long draught of water, refilled his bottle at the spring, and let his fire die down while he smoked a pipe. He was content and well satisfied to be alive and at rest.

A peculiar dizziness touched him, and he knocked out his pipe, thinking it over-strong. From below came a stir and a whine, as of dogs. He went down a step or two and looked around but saw nothing in the starlight except the little white-faced stone dogs at either side of the stairs. Seven of these were in place, he noted, the others being broken or completely gone.

Presently, the candle in his lantern alight, he picked up his gourd of water and passed into his chamber. Here, beside his mat, he found lying three thinly furred pelts. They were whitish in hue, spotted with dark patches, and he perceived that they were hides of dogs.

CHAPTER III.

NIGHT MAGIC.

GORDON wakened to the feel of teeth nipping at his naked hand.

His reaction was sharp and swift, prompted by an instinctive fear of rats. Beside him he had put his heavy-bladed knife, open, ready for instant use. He caught it up, struck out with blind panic speeding his arm. There came a keen and piercing yelp of pain, a flurry in the darkness, the shrill *ki-yi-yi* of a hurt dog.

Gordon leaped to his feet and dashed for the open. In the doorway he found himself caught in the folds of a curtain, placed there since he had entered the room. He passed it, found a flood of moonlight outside, and caught up a heavy billet of wood from the stack of firewood. Then he came out to the terrace and halted, half ashamed of his near panic.

After him, with a whine, came a small creature, a dog of small size, who went dashing past and disappeared with a rush down the wide stairs. Gordon blinked. In this clear moonlight he had a distinct glimpse of the dog, and saw that it was black with a white face.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he exclaimed, staring. "Hit the poor little tyke in the eye—a smear of blood on its cheek! That's too cursed bad. He wasn't hurting me, either; muzzling my hand, perhaps trying to wake me up.

Damn it, I wish I hadn't struck out so sharply!"

Stirred by a feeling of pity, an impulse to find the hurt dog and do what he might to repair the damage, he strode to the stairs and started down. Halfway, he came to a dead halt. The stairs and the ground immediately below were in strong moonlight, every detail as sharp and clear-cut as by daylight. He was quite certain that the last thing before retiring he had counted seven of the white-faced stone dogs here. Now there were eight. And the one opposite him had a dark splotch on its face, over one eye.

"Good Lord! Is my brain twisted or what?" muttered Gordon, grasping the billet of wood. He walked over to the dog in question, half thinking he was mistaking a real dog for one of stone. But no. This animal, like the others on either side of the stairs, was of marble, softened by the years into mellow smoothness. The splotch over its one eye looked rusty. To make sure, Gordon struck a match and held it close; an oxidization in the marble had stained it.

As the match fell from his fingers, he heard a low, menacing growl, and whirled. There below him, glaring up with greenish blazing eyes, crouched low as though to spring, was that same spotted animal that had killed the soldier. Its air was one of instant threat. It was in the very act of plunging up the stairs at him.

Gordon's brain worked fast. Undoubtedly this enormous brute had been drawn by the yapping of the smaller animal he had hurt. His pistol was in his coat, which was still rolled up as a pillow. He had dropped the knife. He had only the billet of wood in his hand. He could not evade the charge.

As the dog leaped, teeth bared, Gordon swung the knotted wood and sprang down at him.

Unable to check its rush, the brute tried to duck the blow, and failed. The heavy club struck full swing on the side of its skull, knocked it sideways and over, sent it rolling and snarling back down the stairs. Dizzily gaining its feet, the dog made a staggering plunge, and again Gordon landed a merciless crack on the side of the head. With a low whine, the creature whirled around, bit at the earth, then turned and dashed off madly among the trees and was gone.

"That's the kind of talk you know best, blast you!" muttered Gordon, panting.

He stood for a moment listening, and heard nothing more. Everything was still, uncannily so. He glanced again at the white-faced dog and shook his head. There was something here he could not understand, something that eluded him. Turning, he knelt at the spring and drank, and the cold water cleared his brain.

"Nerves," he thought, angry at himself. "There's something about this old abandoned place that gets me. Perhaps it's that daffy old duck Hung Shui—any one who's a bit balmy usually has that effect. They say that if you put one nut among a dozen sane men, most of them will be insane by the year's end, and I believe it. Hello! And now, upon my word—"

HE came to the head of the stairs, stepped to the terrace, and glancing at the central hall of the temple, wide open to the moonlight, saw what he must have overlooked in his hasty exit.

There was no sign of the old monk, but evidently he had been hard at

work. Gordon recalled the curtain now hanging at his doorway. And here, where before nightfall had been naked gray stone, heaped-up rubble, emptiness, was now rich luxury. The moonlight did not reach into the recessed hall and he could distinguish few details, but the stone walls were covered with some sort of hangings, the altar was likewise covered and gave forth a glitter of images and sacred vessels, and Gordon could dimly descry tall memorial tablets on either side.

He must have slept several hours, he estimated. His watch was in his coat with the pistol. Since no one was about and the monk had apparently not been drawn by the sounds of conflict, Gordon retraced his steps and entered his own room again. Striking a match, he lighted his lantern and got out his watch. It was after eleven; the hour of the rat.

"It begins to look like a big night," reflected Gordon. "Perhaps the old duffer told the truth after all about hiding away the temple trappings! Either that, or I'm dreaming! The big dog is spotted like the gate guardian, and here are skins of others like him to show that it's no dream. He has little dogs, too, like the fu-dogs on the stairs. Clever old rascal! No wonder the natives think that devils live here!"

He remembered the soldier-bandit who had fled down the road. What would happen when that man rejoined his comrades, who could not be so very far away? It was an even gamble whether they would come here to find the foreign devil they had failed to kill and rob, or whether they would be too afraid of evil spirits to come near the place.

The night was chill, and the earthen floor was very hard. Gordon laid aside the pelts and moved his straw mat to

another spot, where no upthrust stones would hit his back. He turned over the mat to shake it out, and stood looking at it, frowning. Here on this side was a great smear of dull red across the mat, and a running line of red dots, as though some bleeding creature had been dragged off it hastily. But only a man would have been lying on this mat.

Picking up his knife, Gordon pocketed it, thoughtfully. Then he reached down and turned the mat over again, clean side up. What had caused those stains, so sinister and significant? The answer was fairly obvious. A pilgrim had left it here, Hung Shui had said. That monk's name was suggestive, to say the least—Red Water!

PERTURBED, uncertain, Gordon now remembered the tattered old mat in the adjoining little room. Placed under this one, it would take out the chill and hardness of the ground, filthy though it might be. He took up the lantern and went to the entrance of the ruined chamber. No curtain had been hung here. Stooping, he passed in among the débris, held up his light, and pulled away the old straw mat from its pile of round stones.

Gordon froze where he stood. Those were not round stones, but skulls, half a dozen of them, and beneath were other bones, shreds of clothing, broken gourds.

This, at least, was reality.

His first startled shock past, Gordon drew back into his own chamber. He stretched out the old mat, put the clean one on top, arranged the pelts to give him warmth, and put out his light. He was in no shape for sleep, but he wanted to think. He was now definitely alarmed by this place in which he found himself. He had the clew at last. From that wine-drinking invitation on the

tablet by the bridge, to this stained mat and the pile of skulls, the sequence was clear enough. Even that savage brute that had torn out the soldier's throat was part of it all. No wonder the place had an evil reputation!

"And if I had polished off the samshu in that gourd, as most travelers would have done," thought Gordon as he lay in the darkness, "I'd certainly be a soft mark even for that old rascal. He hasn't bothered me while I've been sleeping, though, and he undoubtedly thinks I emptied his gourd of brandy; so, if he aimed to murder me, why hasn't he shown up? Hm! Don't know quite what to make of it all."

Eyes closed, muscles relaxed, he lay for a time trying to determine what it all meant. That he had hit upon the truth with his latest discoveries, he was certain—but why had not the old monk attacked him while he slept? Let him find an answer to this question, and he would have the situation in hand.

He heard a shuffle of sandaled feet in the central hall and sat up, instantly alert. The feet did not approach his chamber; none the less, Gordon stared in startled silence at the wall facing him. Upon this wall appeared luminous, radiant letters, characters outlined in ghastly cold fire.

Gordon spelt them out. He was well acquainted with the Chinese classics, and after a moment he perceived that this was the well-known poem written by the ancient wine-bibber poet, Li Po, in praise of Yang Kwei Fei. His startled alarm died out. Gordon was the least superstitious of men, and was apt at piercing through tricky illusions. These ideographs were certainly real, and he came quietly to his feet, fumbling for his matches. To a Chinese mind, the thing would be horrible and unearthly, but Gordon was

skeptical. He had occasionally used luminous paint himself to impress his native workmen.

Coming close to the wall, whose fiery ideographs stood out strongly, he struck a match. On the instant, the mystery was explained. Upon the ancient stones were lichens and fungi, which frequently had strong luminous properties, and figured largely in Chinese supernatural tales. These growths had simply been trimmed into the proper shapes to form the ideographs of the old poem.

Gordon dropped the match and turned back to his uneasy couch with a short laugh.

"The uncanny usually has a perfectly logical explanation if we only find it," he muttered, drawing up the dog-pelts again. "Taken all in all, this place would give any healthy chink the jimjams, and I'm not sure it wouldn't scare the liver and lights out of me if I were given to credulous fancies. He intimated that the most beautiful woman in the world, probably meaning the old beauty Jade Bracelet, might show up to solace me. It's the hour of the rat, and she hasn't come. Maybe we've scared her off—"

HE became alert once more as he heard again those shuffling feet from the outer hall. His hand crept to the automatic and gripped its butt. Then a low voice came to him, and he recognized the querulous accents of Hung Shui—speaking to some one else outside.

"It is nearly time! When I call, light the lanterns and candles, but not before."

Another voice made indistinct reply. So the old monk was not alone in this place!

There was a rush and patter of tiny

feet. For an instant Gordon was tempted to flight, and felt the cold sweat start on his head—those feet were close around him. Then he realized that it must be the white-faced dog whom he had injured, perhaps a puppy, for it seemed to be gamboling all about him.

Reaching out his hand, he swept it about, touched a small furred form, and found indeed that he had a puppy in his grasp, or a small dog. Probably a puppy, for it nipped playfully at his hand with sharp little teeth, doing him no injury. Whether it were white-faced or not he could not tell in the darkness, but he carefully felt over its head and could detect no sign of blood or any injury.

When he loosed the creature, it darted off and disappeared from hearing. Apparently Hung Shui had a whole colony of dogs somewhere about the place. Gordon wondered how many stone fu-dogs he would find in place out on the stairs if he went and counted them now. He laughed again as he remembered the uncanny sensation that had assailed him when he saw the oxidized splotch on the face of the stone dog out there.

"Perhaps that old duffer worked some mental suggestion on me," he reflected. "That's one of the strong stunts of Taoist magic, they say—"

There was a rustling sound. Lying with his face turned to the doorway, he saw the curtain flung back. The reflected moonlight filled his chamber dimly, and he glimpsed the bent figure of Hung Shui approaching him. He lay motionless. With a wheezy grunt, the old monk came to his knees. Gordon felt the shaking fingers of one hand touch his throat, and only with a supreme effort did he remain motionless. Looking up, he saw the other

hand upraised above him, caught the faint glimmer of steel.

"Here is meat enough and to spare," mumbled the voice of the monk, and his hand flashed down.

CHAPTER IV.

A PICTURE COMES TO LIFE.

WITH his left hand Gordon caught the descending wrist.

His right jerked up the pistol, and he struck with it, as though hitting out with the ball of his hand. The butt caught the monk over the shaven head, and Hung Shui toppled sideways without a sound.

A spasm of cold horror seized upon Gordon. He rose, darted to the entrance and drew the curtain. No one was in sight outside in the central hall. Returning, he struck a match, lighted his lantern, and as the flame flickered up, looked down at the figure of the monk, who still gripped a long knife in his hand. No doubt about his intentions.

"So I was right!" thought Gordon. "And this—this is the place—"

Stories had come to him, out at his mine in the hills, and in Fanchow itself. Somewhere near by, men said, were people crazed with the long unending famine, who sold human flesh to all who would buy. To the Chinese it was nothing v e r y horrible. Flood and famine, pestilence, years of war and bandit rule, had deadened them to everything. They lived like animals and they died like animals. Cannibalism was nothing new, and was spreading far and wide, particularly in flood districts. It was still a fresh and rather dreadful thing in Fanchow and the district around, however—and even to the Chinese it was frightful that human

flesh should be sold like that of animals.

That numbed phrase of the old monk had nerved Gordon's hand with horror. Now, taking up the fallen knife, he ripped a fragment from Hung's robe, tied wrists and ankles together. When he thought of those white, cleaned skulls and bones in the next chamber, and the shreds of clothing, he shivered a little.

The monk had been knocked out only momentarily. Now he opened his eyes, looked up and saw Gordon, and struggled for an instant until he found it futile. His eyes were vicious, filled with hatred, fear, realization.

"You made a mistake, old man," said Gordon. "Your samshu wasn't strong enough to affect a foreign devil. So you kill all who pass this way, eh? Just as you killed the pilgrim who left this mat."

Terror leaped in the wrinkled features.

"Heaven-born, do not kill me!" he whined. To the utter astonishment of Gordon, he abandoned any effort at pretense or denial. "After all, my family must live."

Gordon recalled that Taoist priests are not celibate.

"So, you old reptile and descendant of turtles, you have a family?" he exclaimed. "And for them you kill and rob—"

"At least, who saved you from those bandits, heaven-born?" put in the monk.

Gordon nodded. "Right. Which way is Fanchow from here?"

"Go to the road where I found you, cross the stone bridge, and within half an hour you will come to a shrine of Kuan Yin beside the road. There a faint trail branches off to the right. Take it. Although it is not a good trail

and a horse could not follow it, you can make your way by daylight. That trail goes down into the next valley and comes into the Fanchow road there."

"So. How large is your family?"

"There is only the daughter of my brother, honorable great ancestor! My brother has just died. It is she who helped me decorate the shrine, for to-night prayers must be offered up to Yang Kwei Fei, whose feast it is."

"So that story you told me was not a lie?" said Gordon.

"It was true, worshipful son of heaven, it was true!"

GORDON squatted down, reflectively. All this while he had been absent-mindedly playing with the keen-bladed knife, and it had inspired the old monk with utmost terror. He fell to babbling for mercy, until Gordon curtly bade him shut up.

That he had told the exact truth was quite probable—he was too frightened even to deny his intent. Gordon whistled softly, and at this a fresh access of fright smote the trembling monk, for whistling, as every one knows, is an invitation to devils.

So this explained everything—or nearly everything! This old scoundrel lured pilgrims or passing travelers to spend the night, killed them, robbed them, ate or sold their flesh—ugh! The thought of it was horrible enough. Gordon perceived, however, that he himself had nothing now to fear from his host. This old man and a girl, and a few dogs, no more. Their intent was known, their fangs had been drawn. In this clear moonlight he could leave the place, take up his road and pass the remainder of the night on pine branches as he had first intended.

"I suppose," he asked dryly, "the most beautiful woman in the world,

whom you promised me, is this man-eating niece of yours?"

"No, heaven-born, no!" exclaimed the monk, twisting in his bonds. "She is not—ah!"

A voice pierced to them from the central hall, a shrill woman's voice, instinct with sharp fear.

"Uncle! Uncle! Come quickly, for there are lights among the trees! Men with torches!"

A gasp broke from Hung Shui, and his eyes distended.

"Go and see—how many men, who they are!" he cried out. His gaze drove at Gordon, and the fresh terror in his face was obvious.

"Heaven-born!" he exclaimed. "One of those bandits fled, and now others have come! You must set me free at once or they will murder us!"

Gordon took the pistol from his pocket, significantly.

"What could you do to stop them?" he asked, half ignoring the monk. "You're no warrior. You'd better dive in among the trees."

Hung Shui spat at him, and twisted about frantically.

"Loose me, loose me!" he cried. "They will loot the shrine, steal the hangings, destroy everything! I must stop them! Let me free, heaven-born!"

Gordon was astonished by the earnest intensity of the plea. Before he could respond, the woman's voice came from the outside, shrill, panting.

"Uncle! There are four of them coming up the path, and others are waiting beyond! They are soldiers!"

"That is to say, bandits," muttered Gordon. "The same ones, undoubtedly. Persistent devils!"

"Light the lanterns!" screamed out the old monk. Then he turned a contorted, agonized face to Gordon.

"Heaven-born," he said in a low, suppressed tone, "release me, that the shrine may be protected! If you so desire, kill me later."

With a shrug, Gordon picked up the knife and cut the monk free. It was obvious that there was no safety for any of them except in flight. Four of the bandits, bolder than the rest, were approaching, the others were waiting to see what happened to them before following. Escape to the road was cut off.

"We're all in the same boat, so go ahead," he said in English,

Gaining his feet, old Hung Shui darted to the curtain, ripped it from its supports, and went running across the central hall. Gordon had a glimpse of a figure there at the dais, lighting candles and lanterns—a figure clad from head to foot in a dark concealing robe. He stood up, and saw the monk vanish into the rooms on the farther side of the hall. Had the old rascal merely seized a pretext to be gone and away, or was he really anxious to protect his shrine?

Gordon slipped the pistol into its holster, put the spare clip of cartridges ready to hand in his jacket pocket, and got out his pipe. At all events, he thought, the girl had stuck to her job. A sharp, startled exclamation reached him from outside and below, and he grinned appreciatively. To the four men there in the moonlight, this dark figure at the altar would be quite invisible—the lights must be springing up of themselves, apparently. A moment later he looked and the figure had gone.

THEN, as the candles and lanterns flickered up, Gordon himself was astonished. Those bare ancient stones were transformed. Against them hung the richest of golden bro-

cares, imperial golden yellow, and upon the altar glimmered the dull, rich luster of gold-fired bronze vessels, with the requisite red rug before it. The gold and vermilion tablets presented the name and titles of Yang Kwei Fei to the world. Nakedness was transformed into shimmering significance.

Gordon waited to see what would happen next. So far as the soldiers were concerned, he knew well enough what would take place. Since the revolution of twenty years ago all the institutions of old China had broken down with its political anarchy, and temples that had been venerated for one or two thousand years, shrines of ancient historical interest, tombs respected across the centuries even by robber hordes, had been looted, destroyed, robbed. Human life meant nothing whatever. Those men would come bursting in here filled with the spirit of impish destruction for whatever they met, animal, human, material. If they left the very walls standing, it would be a marvel.

"But," thought Gordon, hand on pistol-butt, "a few of them will go over the long trail before I take to the woods!"

He was actually surprised, for he thought the old monk had fled, when Hung Shui suddenly strode out into the light and prostrated himself before the altar—clad now in the most gorgeous of robes. Behind him was a more slender figure, also in the robes of a priest, who crossed the central hall and stood with her back to Gordon. The old monk rose and went to the left side of the hall, after lighting a number of incense sticks. He stood looking toward Gordon, who watched him frowningly, but spoke not, nor made any move whatever.

With a scrape of booted feet, four

figures approached across the marble terrace and came presently within Gordon's range of vision. They were disbanded soldiers, sure enough, and had dropped their torches to grasp their rifles. They stared at the lighted altar, at the inscribed tablets, at the monk's figure, with stupid, bestial faces all agape. The second monk had disappeared.

One of them pointed. Gordon looked, and was astonished to see, at the opposite side of the temple hall, a huge screen. Two sections of it were visible, showing life-size figures in ancient armor—the shapes of warriors. As he looked, Gordon saw the lights change imperceptibly about the altar. Standing behind the scenes, as it were, he realized that Hung Shui or his niece could control the upward blaze of light, not unlike electric flood-lights, which must come from concealed lamps or lanterns.

Suddenly one of the soldiers flung up his rifle, turning toward Hung Shui.

"Where is the foreign devil?" he demanded harshly. Another checked him.

"Wait! Kill these first, seek the foreign devil later. Here is plunder—"

Abruptly, the man's voice died out in a frightened chirp. The four of them stood silent, staring, stupefied. Gordon leaned forward, incredulous.

A shape came forward past Hung Shui, whose niece-monk had somehow vanished from the scene. This was the slender, lissom shape of a woman clad in robes of ancient style. Without regard to any one here, she advanced to the red rug, held out a fan, and then began a slow and stately dance. Her face was painted and rouged, her hair-jewels sparkled in the light, her garments were stiffly gorgeous.

Now, Gordon had beheld many a dancer in China, from the tea-house

girls to the incomparable Mei Lang Fan himself, but never on any stage had he beheld such dancing as this. The slender grace of it, the delicacy of it, were marvelous. He knew that he must be watching some consummate artist. To Chinese eyes, however, this painted woman was more than a dancer. She was supremely and ineffably beautiful, the moon-goddess come to earth. One of the four bandits flung himself down in adoring prostration. But another, he who had spoken of plunder, took a step forward.

"Like a flower floating among clouds, this one is beautiful!" broke in his harsh, raucous tones. "Come, lovely one! You are mine—"

He darted at the dancer, to encircle her slender figure with his arm.

The little fan tapped him. He stood stock still, his arms reaching out. The dancer seemed to float from under his hand, and, still dancing, drew back past the immobile Hung Shui, back past that huge screen, which was now abruptly in shadow, only partially visible.

WITH a sharp cry of anger and eager lust, the bandit recovered himself and sprang forward. Hung Shui moved. From his hand fluttered down bits of torn paper to the stones. Gordon craned forward with startled realization. He had heard of the "paper men" trick of the Taoist priests, a trick celebrated in Chinese legend and annals but never explained except as hypnotic illusion. He had never seen it performed. But now—

Again the bandit halted, and now a more piercing cry burst from him. It was echoed by his companions. An armored figure suddenly had appeared, barring his way. A second seemed to spring up from the shadows. Fantas-

tic, they stood there, brandishing swords that glittered and blazed and swung like the marvelous weapons of Chinese sword-juggling dancers.

Gordon stared in utter amazement. He tried to tell himself that these were the two painted figures from the screen, that they were unreal, that it was some fantasy. But he heard their armor clash, saw their three-dimension shapes of flesh and blood. Trick or not, there they were. Real men hidden behind that screen? Paper, painted figures that moved? An illusion of the senses?

The answer came, sharp and bloody.

The stupefied bandit wakened to life, flung up his rifle. It exploded, burst forth again, the two sharp reports vibrating under the roof. One of those two glittering, gleaming blades swept in upon him. The point of it ripped under his ribs, all but cut him asunder. He fell forward to the pavement in a rush of blood.

From the other three men broke fantastic screams of fright and terror. They lifted their weapons. Abruptly, the two swordsmen clanked forward and fell upon them. Shots rang out. Then an enormous puff of smoke billowed up from the very stones, obscuring everything, and the acrid reek of gunpowder filled the air.

When it cleared somewhat, the three soldier-bandits were fighting the empty air, backing away, cursing, dodging invisible blows. The two men in ancient armor had vanished from sight. There on the stones were two scraps of paper; behind, loomed the screen. But the dead bandit in his spreading pool of blood was very real.

The three survivors turned and ran toward Gordon. They saw him standing there and up came their rifles. A shot rang out, and the bullet sang over his head—in their terror and alarm,

they could hit nothing. Gordon lifted his pistol and deliberately pressed the trigger.

One of the three pitched headlong and lay still. The second man let fall his rifle and caught at his hurt arm. Then the third burst into a fearful, yammering howl of awful terror. Both of them whirled about, their backs to the altar, to face a great shape with slaving jaws rushing at them across the terrace.

It was the same spotted dog that had slain the bandit on the bridge.

With terrific impetus, the creature came leaping forward, a mad snarling growl on its foaming lips. He hurled himself at the wounded bandit, brought down the shrieking man, worried his throat, and then swung around with a clash of teeth upon the sole survivor.

That man screamed out in horrible fright; none the less, he shoved his rifle against the creature's head and fired. The shot blew off the whole top of the animal's skull. Yet, with a dying effort, the dog gathered himself and sprang, and so died, with his teeth locked in the arm of the man.

The last Gordon saw of this fourth bandit, he was dragging himself across the terrace in agonized flight, dragging the weight of the dead brute after him, and then was gone among the moonlit trees below, shrieking in a frenzied voice.

Gordon strode out hastily, hearing voices. As he came to the opening and stood on the moonlit terrace, two more bandits appeared at the top of the stairs, holding their rifles ready, one of them thrusting up a blazing torch. Gordon whipped up his pistol and fired. One of them spun about and fell. The other dashed down his torch and took to his heels with a wild yell.

There were no others. There would be no others.

Gordon swung around and surveyed the scene before him. He stood stupefied.

THE three dead bandits—well, these were real enough! But everything else had changed. Those concealed lights had died away. Only a dozen candle-stubs now lighted the altar. The huge screen had vanished. Whatever tricks of illusion, of light and shadow, had mastered the beholders, were now gone, dissipated.

Hung Shui had fallen forward upon his knees. Two men, clad in ancient armor, were supporting him. At his side stood a girl's figure, her face heavily painted. As Gordon strode toward them, the three uttered low, sharp cries of fright, perhaps at the pistol in his hand. Then they turned about and fled, and were gone, leaving the old monk. He was at the edge of the moonlight, and a great splotch of crimson-black was seeping out from him, spreading over the stones.

One of those wild and futile rifle-shots had found a mark.

Old Hung Shui looked up as Gordon stood before him. A grin contorted his wrinkled countenance, a grimace of recognition and grim satisfaction.

"Well, foreign devil!" His voice was tremulous, fading. "You have seen—the most beautiful woman—in the world! And you have—seen—other things—"

Tricks, illusions, clever work, perhaps even hypnotic work—yes, he had seen.

"Let me look at your hurt, old man," said Gordon gently.

The other pushed him back. "What use? The gods—have spoken." The

head of Hung Shui drooped, his body drooped, and he quietly fell forward on his face and was dead.

Gordon stood up, drew a deep breath, looked around. No use seeking the girl or her two men. They feared him. Her destiny was her own. He looked out toward the road. The lights had gone, the bandits were scattered, departed. With sudden decision, he went into his chamber and caught up the gourd bottle.

With this he came out across the terrace, went to the steps, filled it at the spring in the moonlight. Everything was quiet, an unearthly silence had fallen. He did not think to count the little white-faced dogs on the stairs. He wanted to get gone as quickly as possible, and this was the one thought possessing him.

Glancing around among the trees, as he strode toward the path, he saw nothing of the dead spotted dog that the soldier had dragged from the terrace. He came to the entrance gates, and found the inner gates bathed in a flood of clear moonlight, for no trees stood just here. He glanced at the two guardian dogs, with their splotches of lichen and moss, and stared fixedly at one of them.

The dog on the right, this dog of ancient weathered stone, had the top of its head broken off—clean broken off. Gordon went close and looked at it. The break was fresh, clean white stone showing. Perhaps one of the soldiers had swung a rifle-butt at it, or perhaps—

"Damn the whole place!" exclaimed Gordon angrily, and went swinging away at a rapid stride toward the highway and the trail to Fanchow.

For in this, at least, the old monk had told him the exact truth.

THE END.