

Ching, Ching, Chinaman

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BY WILBUR DANIEL STEELE

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How gaily we used to chant it over Yen Sin's scow when I was a boy on Urkey water-front, and how unfailingly it brought the minister charging down upon us. I can see him now, just as he used to burst upon our vision from the wharf lane, face paper-white, eyes warm with a holy wrath, lips moving uncontrollably. And I can hear his voice trembling at our heels as we scuttled off:

"For shame, lads! Christ died for him, lads! For shame! Shame!"

And looking back I can see him there on the wharf above the scow, hands hanging, shoulders falling together, brooding over the unredeemed.

Minister Malden had seen "the field" in a day of his surging youth--seen it, and no more. He had seen it from the deck of the steamer by which he had come out, and by which he had now to return, since his seminary bride had fallen sick on the voyage. He perceived the teeming harbor clogged with junks and house-boats, the muddy river, an artery out of the heart of darkness, the fantastic, colored shore-lines, the vast, dull drone of heathendom stirring in his ears, the temple gongs calling blindly to the blind, the alluring and incomprehensible accents of the boatmen's tongue which he was to have made his own and lightened with the fierce sweet name of the Cross--and now could not.

Poor young Minister Malden, he turned his face away. He gave up "the field" for the bride, and when the bride went out in mid-ocean, he had neither bride nor field. He drifted back to New England, somehow or other, and found Yen Sin.

He found another bride too; Minister Malden was human. It was a mercy of justice, folks said, when Widow Gibbs got a man like Minister Malden. Heaven knows she had had bad enough luck with Gibbs, a sallow devil of a whaler who never did a fine act in his life till he went down with his vessel and all hands in the Arctic one year and left Sympathy Gibbs sitting alone in the Pillar House on Lovett's Court, pretty, plump, and rather well-to-do as Urkey goes.

Everybody in the island was glad enough when those two undertook to mend each other's blasted life--everybody but Mate Snow. He had been thinking of Sympathy Gibbs himself, they said; and they said he stood behind the prescription screen in his drug-store far into the night, after the betrothal was given out in Center Church, his eyes half-closed, his thin lips bluish white, and hell-fire smouldering out of sight in him. And they said Mate was the kind that never forget. That was what made it so queer.

It seems to me that I must remember the time when the minister lived in the Pillar House with Sympathy Gibbs.

Back there in the mists of youth I seem to see them walking home together after the Sunday morning preaching, arm in arm and full of a sedate joy; turning in between the tubbed box-trees at Lovett's Court, loitering for a moment to gaze out over the smooth harbor and nod to the stragglers of the congregation before they entered the big green door flanked by the lilac panes.

Perhaps it was told me. There can be no question, though, that I remember the night when Minister Malden came home from the Infield Conference, a father of two days' standing. Urkey village made

a festival of that homecoming to the tiny daughter he had never seen, and to Sympathy Gibbs, weak and waiting and radiant. Yes, I remember.

We were all at the landing, making a racket. The minister looked ill when he came over the packet's side, followed by Mate Snow, who had gone to Conference with him as lay delegate from Center Church. Our welcome touched him in a strange and shocking way; he staggered and would have fallen had it not been for Mate's quick hand. He had not a word to say to us; he walked up the shore street between the wondering lines till he came to the Pillar House, and there he stood for a moment, silhouetted against the open door, a drooping, hunted figure, afraid to go in.

We saw his shadow later, moving uncertainly across the shades in the upper chamber where Sympathy Gibbs lay with her baby, his hand lifted once with the fingers crooked in mysterious agony. Some one started a hymn in the street below and people took it up, bawling desperately for comfort to their souls. Mate Snow didn't sing. He stood motionless between the box-trees, staring up at the lighted window shades, as if waiting. By-and-by Minister Malden came down the steps, and moving away beside him like a drunken man, went to live in the two rooms over the drugstore. And that was the beginning of it.

* * *

Folks said Mate Snow was not the kind to forget an injury, and yet it was Mate who stood behind the minister through those first days of shock and scandal, who out-faced the congregation with his stubborn, tight lips, and who shut off the whisperings of the Dorcas Guild with the sentence which was destined to become a sort of formula on his tongue through the ensuing years:

"You don't know what's wrong, and neither do I; but we can all see the man's a saint, can't we?"

"But the woman?" some still persisted.

"Sympathy Gibbs? You ought to know Sympathy Gibbs by this time."

And if there was a faint curling at the corners of his lips, they were all too dull to wonder at it. As for me, the boy, I took the changing phenomena of life pretty well for granted, and wasted little of my golden time speculating about such things. But as I look back now on the blunt end of those Urkey days, I seem to see Minister Malden growing smaller as he comes nearer, and Mate Snow growing larger--Mate Snow browbeating the congregation with a more and more menacing righteousness--Minister Malden, in his protecting shadow, leaner, grayer, his eyes burning with an ever fiercer zeal, escaping Center Church and slipping away to redeem the Chinaman.

"There is more joy in heaven over one sinner," was his inspiration, his justification, and, I suspect, his blessed opiate.

But it must have been hard on Yen Sin. I remember him now, a steam-blurred silhouette, earlier than the earliest, later than the latest, swaying over his tubs and sad-irons in the shanty on the stranded scow by Pickett's wharf, dreaming perhaps of the populous rivers of his birth, or of the rats he ate, or of the opium he smoked at dead of night, or of those weird, heathen idols before which he bowed down his shining head--familiar and inscrutable alien.

An evening comes back to me when I sat in Yen Sin's shop and waited for my first "stand up" collar to be ironed, listening with a kind of awe to the tide making up the flats, muffled and unfamiliar, and inhaling the perfume compounded of steam, soap, hot linen, rats, opium, tea, idols and what-not peculiar to Yen Sin's shop and to a thousand lone shops in a thousand lone villages scattered across the mainland. When

the precious collar was at last in my hands, still limp and hot from its ordeal, Yen Sin hung over me in the yellow nimbus of the lamp, smiling at my wonder. I stared with a growing distrust at the flock of tiny bird-scratches inked on the band.

"What," I demanded suspiciously, "is *that*?"

"Lat's Mista You," he said, nodding his head and summoning another hundred of wrinkles to his damp, polished face.

"That ain't my name. You don't know my name," I accused him.

"Mista Yen Sin gottee name, allee light."

The thing fascinated me, like a serpent.

"Whose name is *that*, then?" I demanded, pointing to a collar on the counter between us. The band was half-covered with the cryptic characters, done finely and as if with the loving hand of an artist.

Yen Sin held it up before his eyes in the full glow of the lamp. His face seemed incredibly old; not senile, like our white-beards mumbling on the wharves, but as if it had been a long, long time in the making and was still young. I thought he had forgotten me, he was so engrossed in his handiwork.

"Lat colla?" he mused by-and-by. "Lat's Mista Minista, boy."

"Mister Minister *Malden*?"

And there both of us stared a little, for there was a voice at the door.

"Yes? Yes? What is it?"

Minister Malden stood with his head and shoulders bent, wary of the low door-frame, and his eyes blinking in the new light. I am sure he did not see me on the bench; he was looking at Yen Sin.

"How is it with you to-night, my brother?"

The Chinaman straightened up and faced him, grave, watchful.

"Fine," he said. "Mista Yen Sin fine. Mista Minista fine, yes?"

He bowed and motioned his visitor to a rocker, upholstered with a worn piece of Axminster and a bit of yellow silk with half a dragon on it. The ceremony, one could see, was not new. Vanishing into the further mysteries of the rear, he brought out a bowl of tea, steaming, a small dish of heathenish things, nuts perhaps, or preserves, deposited the offering on the minister's pointed knees, and retired behind the counter to watch and wait.

An amazing change came over the minister. Accustomed to seeing him gentle, shrinking, illusively non-resisting, I scarcely knew this white flame of a man, burning over the tea-bowl!

"You are kind to me," he cried, "and yet your heart is not touched. I would give up my life gladly, brother, if I could only go up to the Throne and say to Jesus, 'Behold, Lord, Thy son, Yen Sin, kneeling at the foot of the Cross. Thou gavest me the power, Lord, and the glory is thine!' If I could say that, brother, I--I--"

His voice trailed off, though his lips continued to move uncertainly. His face was transfigured, his eyes filmed with dreams. He was looking beyond Yen Sin now, and on the lost yellow millions. The tea, untasted, smoked upward into his face, an insidious, narcotic cloud. I can think of him now as he sat there, wresting out of his easeless years one moment of those seminary dreams; the color of far-away, the sweet shock of the alien and the bizarre, the enormous odds,

the Game. The walls of Yen Sin's shop were the margins of the world, and for a moment the missionary lived.

"He would soften your heart," he murmured. "In a wondrous way. Have you never thought, Yen Sin, 'I would like to be a good man'?"

The other spread his right hand across his breast.

"Mista Yen Sin velly humble dog. Mista Yen Sin no good. Mista Yen Sin's head on le glound. Mista Yen Sin velly good man. Washy colla fine."

It was evidently an old point, an established score for the heathen.

"Yes, I must say, you do do your work. I've brought you that collar for five years now, and it still seems new." The minister's face fell a little. Yen Sin continued grave and alert.

"And Mista Matee Snow, yes? His colla allee same like new, yes?"

"Yes, I must say!" The other shook himself. "But it's not that, brother. We're all of us wicked, Yen Sin, and unless we--"

"Mista Minista wickee?"

For a moment the minister's eyes seemed fascinated by the Chinaman's; pain whitened his face.

"All of us," he murmured uncertainly, "are weak. The best among us sins in a day enough to blacken eternity. And unless we believe, and have faith in the Divine Mercy of the Father, and confess--confession--" His voice grew stronger and into it crept the rapt note of one whose auditor is within. "Confession! A sin confessed is no longer a sin. The word spoken out of the broken and contrite heart makes all things right. If one but had faith in that! If--if one had Faith!"

The life went out of his voice, the fire died in his eyes, his fingers drooped on the tea-bowl. The Chinaman's clock was striking the half after seven. He stared at the floor, haggard with guilt.

"Dear me, I'm late for prayer-meeting again. Snow will be looking for me."

I slipped out behind him, glad enough of Urkey's raw air after that close chamber of mysteries. I avoided the wharf-lane, however, more than a little scared by this sudden new aspect of the Minister, and got myself out to the shore street by Miah White's yard and the grocery porch, and there I found myself face to face with Mate Snow. That frightened me still more, for the light from Henny's Notions' window was shining oddly in his eyes.

"You're lookin' for the minister," I stammered, ducking my head.

He stopped and stared down at me, tapping a sole on the cobbles.

"What's this? What's this?"

"He--he says you'd be lookin' for 'im, an' I seen 'im to the Chinaman's an' he's comin' right there, honest he is, Mr. Snow."

"Oh! So? I'd be looking for him, would I?"

"Y--y--yessir."

I sank down on the grocery steps and studied my toes.

"He was *there*, though!" I protested in desperation, when we had been waiting in vain for a long quarter-hour. The dark monitor lifted his chin from his collar and looked at his watch.

"It's hard," I heard him sigh, as he turned away down Lovett's Court, where Center Church blossomed with its prayer-meeting lamps. Shadows of the uneasy flock moved across the windows; Emsy Nickerson, in his trustee's black, peered out of the door into the dubious night, and beyond him in the bright vestry Aunt Nickerson made a little spot of color, agitated, nursing formless despairs, an artist in vague dreads.

I was near enough, at the church steps, to hear what Mate told them.

"I'll lead to-night. He's gone out in the back-country to pray alone."

Aunt Nickerson wept quietly, peeping from the corners of her eyes. Reverent awe struggled with an old rebellion in Emsy's face, and in others as they came crowding. The trustee broke out bitterly:

"Miah White's took to the bottle again, along o' him. If only he'd do his prayin' at Miah's house a spell, 'stead o' the back-country--"

"There was a back-country in Judea," Mate cried him down. "And some one prayed there, not one night, but forty nights and days!"

What a far cry it was from the thwarted lover behind the prescription screen, fanning the flames of hell-fire through the night, to the Seer thundering in the vestry--had there been any there with heads enough to wonder at it.

It happened from time to time, this mysterious retreat into the moors, more frequently as the Infield Conference drew on and the hollows deepened in the minister's cheeks and his eyes shone brighter with foreboding. Nor was this the first time the back-country had been mentioned in the same breath with the Wilderness of Judea. I can remember our Miss Beedie, in Sunday School, lifting her eyes and sighing at the first verse of the fourth chapter of the Book of Luke.

And to-night, while I crept off tingling through the dark of Lovett's Court, he was in the Wilderness again, and I had seen him last.

I brought up by one of the tubbed box-trees and peered in at the Pillar House with a new wonder. I was so used to it there, dead on the outside and living on the inside, that I had never learned to think of it as a strange thing. Perhaps a dozen times I had seen little Hope Gibbs (they still said "Gibbs") playing quietly among the lilacs in the back yard. It was always at dusk when the shadows were long there, and she a shadow among them, so unobtrusive and far away. As for her mother, no one ever saw Sympathy Gibbs.

Crouching by the box-tree, I found myself wondering what they were doing in there, Sympathy Gibbs and the little girl; whether they were sleeping, or whether they were sitting in the dark, thinking, or whispering about the husband and father who was neither husband nor father, or whether, in some remote chamber, there might not be a lamp or a candle burning.

The dead hush of the place oppressed me. I turned my head to look back at the comfortable, bumbling devotion of Center Church, and this is what I saw there.

The door was still open, a blank, bright rectangle giving into the deserted vestry, and it was against this mat of light that I spied Minister Malden's head and shoulders thrust furtively, as he peeped in and seemed to harken to the muffled unison of the prayer.

You may imagine me startled enough at that, but what of my emotion when, having peeped and listened and reassured himself for a dozen seconds, Minister Malden turned and came softly down the Court toward the gate and the box-trees and me, a furtive silhouette against the door-light, his face turned back over one shoulder.

I couldn't bolt; he was too close for that. The wonder was that he failed to see me, for he stopped within two yards of where I cowered in the shadow and stood for a long time gazing in between the trees at the pillared porch, and I could hear his breathing, uneven and laborious, as though he had been running or fighting. Once I thought he struck out at something with a vicious fist. Then his trouble was gone, between two winks, and he was gone too, up the walk and up the steps, without any to-do about it. I don't know whether he tapped on the door or not. It was open directly. I caught a passing glimpse of Sympathy Gibbs in the black aperture; the door closed on them both, and the Pillar House was dead again.

Now this was an odd way for Minister Malden to fast and pray in the Wilderness--odd enough, one would say, to keep me waiting there a while to see what would come of it all. But it didn't. I had had enough of mysteries for one Summer's night, or at any rate I had enough by the time I got my short legs, full tilt, into the shore street. For I had caught a fleeting glimpse, on the way, of a watcher in the shadow behind the *other* box-tree--Yen Sin, the heathen, with a surprised eyeball slanting at me over one shoulder.

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Among the most impressive of the phenomena of life, as noted in my thirteenth year, is the amazing way in which a community can change while one is away from it a month. Urkey village at the beginning of my 'teens seemed to me much the same Urkey village upon which I had first opened my eyes. And then I went to make a visit with my uncle Orville Means in Gillyport, just across the Sound, and when I came back on the packet I could assure myself with all the somber satisfaction of the returning exile that I would scarcely have known the old place.

Gramma Pilot's cow had been poisoned. There had been a fire in the Selectmen's room at Town Hall. Amber Matheson had left Mrs.

Wharf's Millinery and set up for herself, opposite the Eastern School. And Mate Snow, all of a sudden, had bought the old Pons house, on the hill hanging high over the town, and gone to live there. With a leap, and as it were behind my back, he sat there dominating the village and the harbor and the island--our Great Man.

He took Minister Malden with him, naturally, out of the two rooms over the store, into one room in the third story of the house on the hill--where Sympathy Gibbs could see him if she chose to look that way, as frankly and ignominiously a dependent as any baron's chaplain in the Golden Days.

"She'd have done better with Mate, after all," folks began to say.

But of all the changes in the village, the most momentous to me was the change in Yen Sin. I don't know why it should have been I, out of all the Urkey youth, who went to the Chinaman's; perhaps it was the spiritual itch left from that first adventure on the scow. At any rate, I had fallen into a habit of dropping in at the cabin, and not always with a collar to do.

I had succeeded in worming out of him the meaning of that first set of bird-scratches on my collar-band--"The boy who throws clam-shells"--and of a second and more elaborate writing--"The boy who is courageous in the face of all the water of the ocean, yet trembles before so much of it as may be poured in a wash-basin." There came a third inscription in time, but of that he would not tell me, nor of Mate Snow's, nor the minister's. It was a queer library he had, those fine-written collars of Urkey village.

He had been growing feebler so long and so gradually that I had made nothing of it. Once, I remember, it struck me queer that he wasn't working so hard as he had used to. Still earliest of all and latest of all, he would sometimes leave his iron cooling on the board now and stand for minutes of the precious day, dreaming out of the harbor

window. When the sun was sinking, the shaft through the window bathed his head and his lean neck with a quality almost barbaric, and for a moment in the gloom made by the bright pencil, the new, raw things of Urkey faded out, leaving him alone in his ancient and ordered civilization, a little wistful, I think, and perhaps a little frightened, as a child waking from a long, dreaming sleep, to find his mother gone.

He had begun to talk about China, too, and the river where he was born. And I made nothing of it, it came on so gradually, day by day. Then I went away, as I have said, and came back again. I dropped in at the scow the second day after the packet brought me home.

"Hello, there!" I cried, peeping over the counter, "I got a collar for you to--to--" I began to stumble. "Mr. Yen Sin, dear me, what's the matter of you?"

"Mista Yen Sin fine," he said in a strengthless voice, smiling and nodding from the couch where he lay, half propped up by a gorgeous, faded cushion. "Mista Yen Sin go back China way pletty quick now, yes."

"Honest?"

He made no further answer, but took up the collar I had brought.

"You been gone Gillypo't, yes? You take colla China boy, yes?"

"Yessir!"

"He pletty nice man, Sam Low, yes?"

"Oh, you know him, then? Oh, he's all right, Yen Sin."

It was growing dark outside, and colder, with a rising wind from landward to seaward against the tide. A sense of something odd and wrong came over me; it was a moment before I could make it out. The fire was dead in the stove for the first time in memory and the Vestal irons were cold. Yen Sin asked me to light the lamp. In the waxing yellow glow he turned his eyes to mine, and mine were big.

"You know Mista God?" he questioned.

"Oh, yes," I answered soberly. "Yes, indeed."

"Mista God allee same like Mista Yen Sin, yes?"

I felt myself paling at his blasphemy, and thought of lightning.

"Mista God," he went on in the same speculative tone, "Mista God know allee bad things, allee same like Mista Yen Sin, yes?"

"Where is the minister?" I demanded in desperation.

"Mista Yen Sin likee see Mista Minista." When he added, with a transparent hand fluttering over his heart: "Like see pletty quick now," I seemed to fathom for the first time what was happening to him.

"Wait," I cried, too full of awe to know what I said. "Wait, wait, Yen Sin. I'll fetch 'im."

It was dark outside, the sky overcast, and the wind beginning to moan a high note across the roofs as it swept in from the moors and out again over the graying waters. In the shore street my eyes chanced upon the light of Center Church, and I remembered that it was meeting-night.

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There was only a handful of worshippers that evening, but a thousand could have had no more eyes it seemed to me as I tiptoed down the aisle with the scandalized pad-pad of Emsy Nickerson's pursuing soles behind my back. Confusion seized me; I started to run, and had come almost up to Mister Malden before I had wit enough to discover that it wasn't Minister Malden at all, but Mate Snow in the pulpit, standing with an open hymn-book in one hand and staring down at me with grim, inquiring eyes. After a time I managed to stammer:

"The Chinaman, you know--he's goin' to die--the minister--"

Then I fled, dodging Emsy's legs. Confused voices followed me; Aunt Nickerson's full of a nameless horror; Mate Snow's, thundering: "Brother Hemans, you will please continue the meeting. I will go and see what I can do. But your prayers are needed here."

Poor Minister Malden! His hour had struck--the hour so long awaited--and now it was Mate Snow who should go to answer it. Perhaps the night had something to do with it, and the melancholy disaster of the wind. Perhaps it was the look of Mate Snow's back as he passed me, panting on the steps, his head bowed with his solemn and triumphant stewardship. But all of a sudden I hated him, this righteous man. He had so many things, and Minister Malden had nothing--nothing but the Chinaman's soul--and he was going to try and get that too.

I had to find Minister Malden, and right away. But where *was* he, and on prayer-meeting night too? My mind skipped back. The "Wilderness."

I was already ducking along the Court to reconnoiter the Pillar House, black and silent beyond the box-trees. And then I put my hands in my pockets, my ardor dimmed by the look of that vacant, staring face. What was I, a boy of thirteen, against that house? I could knock at the door, to be sure, as the minister had done that other night. Yes; but when I stood, soft-footed, on the porch, the thought that Sympathy

Gibbs might open it suddenly and find me there sent the hands back again into the sanctuary of my pockets. What did I know of her? What did any one know of her? To be confronted by her, suddenly, in the dark behind a green door--I tiptoed down the steps.

If only there were a cranny of light somewhere in the dead place! I began to prowl around the yard, feeling adventurous enough, you may believe, for no boy had ever scouted that bit of Urkey land before. And I did find a light, beneath a drawn shade in the rear. Approaching as stealthily as a red Indian, I put one large, round eye to the aperture.

If I had expected a melodramatic tableau, I was disappointed. I had always figured the inside of the Pillar House as full of treasures, for they told tales of the old whaler's wealth. My prying eyes found it bare, like a deserted house gutted by seasons of tramps. A little fire of twigs and a broken butter-box on the hearth made a pathetic shift at domestic cheer. Minister Malden sat at one side of it, his back to me, his face half-buried in his hands. Little Hope Gibbs played quietly on the floor, building pig-pens with a box of matches, a sober, fire-lined shade. Sympathy Gibbs was not in the picture, but I heard her voice after a moment, coming out from an invisible corner.

"How much do you want this time, Will?"

"Want?" There was an anguished protest in the man's cry.

"Need, then." The voice was softer.

The minister's face dropped back in his hands, and after a moment the words came out between his tight fingers, hardly to be heard.

"Five hundred dollars, Sympathy."

I thought there was a gasp from the corner, suppressed. I caught the sound of a drawer pulled open and the vague rustling of skirts as the woman moved about. Her voice was as even as death itself.

"Here it is, Will. It brings us to the end, Will. God knows where it will come from next time."

"It--it--you mean--" An indefinable horror ran through the minister's voice, and I could see the cords shining on the hands which gripped the chair-arms. "Next time--next year--" His eyes were fixed on the child at his feet. "God knows where it will come from. Perhaps--before another time--something will happen. Dear little Hope--little girl!"

The child's eyes turned with a preoccupied wonder as the man's hand touched her hair; then went back to the alluring pattern of the matches.

Sympathy Gibbs spoke once more.

"I've found out who holds the mortgage, Will. Mr. Dow told me."

His hand slid from Hope's hair and hung in the air. During the momentary hush his head, half-turned, seemed to wait in a praying suspense.

"It's Mate Snow," the voice went on. The man covered his face.

"Thank God!" he said. I thought he shivered. "Then it's all--all right," he sighed after a moment. "I was afraid it might be somebody who would--who might make trouble." He took out a handkerchief and touched his forehead with it. "Thank--God!"

"Why do you thank God?" A weariness, like anger, touched her words.

"Why? Why do I thank God?" He faced her, wondering. "Because he has given me a strong man to be my friend and stand behind me. Because Mate Snow, who might have hated me, has--"

"Has sucked the life out of you!" It came out of the corner like a blade. "Yes, yes, he has sucked the life out of you in his hate, and thrown the dry shell of you to me; and that makes him feel good on his hill there. No, no, no; I'm going to say it now. Has he ever tried to find out what was wrong with us? No. He didn't need to. Why? Because no matter what it was, we were given over into his hands, body and soul. And now it's Mate Snow who is the big man of this island, and it's the minister that eats the crumbs that fall from his table, and folks pity you and honor him because he's so good to you, and--"

And this was Urkey village, and night, and Yen Sin was dying.

"And he's down to the Chinaman's *now!*" I screamed, walking out of my dream. "An' the Chinaman's dyin' an' wants the minister, an' Mate Snow he got there first."

The light went out in the room; I heard a chair knocked over, and then Minister Malden's voice: "God forgive me! God forgive me!"

I ran, sprawling headlong through the shrubs.

Out in the dark of Lovett's Court I found people all about me, the congregation, let out, hobbling and skipping and jostling shoreward, a curious rout. Others were there, not of the church; Kibby Baker, the atheist, who had heard the news through the church window where he peeped at the worshipers; Miah White's brother, the ship-calker, summoned by his sister; a score of others, herding down the dark wind. At the shore street, folks were coming from the Westward. It was strange to see them all and to think it was only a heathen dying.

Or, perhaps, it wasn't so strange, when one remembered Minister Malden coming down the years with that light in his eyes, building his slow edifice, like one in Israel prophesying the coming of the Messiah.

I shall never forget the picture I saw that night from the deck of the Chinaman's scow. The water here in the lee was as smooth as black glass, save for the little ground-swell that rocked the outer end of the craft. The tide was rising; the grounded end would soon be swimming. There were others on the deck with me, and more on the dock overhead, their faces picked out against the sky by the faint irradiations from the lighted shanty beneath. And over and behind it all ran the tumult of the elements; behind it the sea, where it picked up on the Bight out there beyond our eyes; above it the wind, scouring the channels of the crowded roofs and flinging out to meet the waters, like a ravening and disastrous bride.

Mate Snow stood by the counter in the little cabin, his close-cropped head almost to the beams, his voice, dry austere, summoning the Chinaman to repentance. "Verily, if a man be not born again, he shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." His eyes skipped to the door.

"And to be born again," he went on with a hint of haste, "you must confess, Yen Sin, and have faith. That is enough. The outer and inner manifestations--confession and faith."

"Me, Mista Yen Sin--confessee?"

A curious and shocking change had come over the Chinaman in the little time I had been away. He lay quite motionless on his couch, with a bit of silken tapestry behind his head, like a heathen halo protecting him at last. He was more alive than he had been, precisely because the life had gone out of him, and he was no longer bothered with it. His face was a mask, transparent and curiously luminous, and there for the

first time I saw the emotion of humor, which is another name for perception.

His unclouded eyes found me by the door and he moved a hand in a vague gesture. I went, walking stiff-legged, awe mingling with self-importance.

"Mista Boy, please," he whispered in my ear. "The collas on the shelf theah. Led paypah--"

Wondering, I took them down and piled them on the couch beside him, one after another, little bundles done up carefully in flaring tissue with black characters inked on them.

"That one!" he whispered, and I undid the one under his finger, discovering half a dozen collars, coiled with their long imprisonment.

"And that one, and that one--"

They covered his legs and rose about his thin shoulders, those treasured soiled collars of his, gleaming under the lamp like the funeral-pyre of some fantastic potentate. Nothing was heard in the room save the faint crackling of the paper, and after a moment Lem Pigeon murmuring in amazement to his neighbor, over in a corner.

"Look a-there, will ye? He's got my collar with the blood spot onto it where the Lisbon woman's husband hit me that time down to New Bedford. What ye make o' that now?"

Yen Sin lifted his eyes to Mate Snow's hanging over him in wonder.

"Mista Matee Snow confessee, yes?"

There was a moment of shocked silence while our great man stared at Yen Sin. He took his weight from the counter and stood up straight.

"I confess my sins to God," he said.

The other moved a fluttering hand over his collars. "Mista Yen Sin allee same like Mista God, yes."

In the hush I heard news of the blasphemy whispering from lip to lip, out the door and up the awe-struck dock. Mate Snow lifted a hand.

"Stop!" he cried. "Yen Sin, you are standing in the Valley of the Shadow of Death--"

"Mista Matee Snow wickee man? No? Yes? Mista Matee Snow confessee?"

The Chinaman was making a game of his death-bed, and even the dullest caught the challenge. Mate Snow understood. The yellow man had asked him with the divine clarity of the last day either to play the game or not to play the game. And Mate Snow wanted something enough to play.

"Yes," he murmured, "I am weak. All flesh is weak." He faltered, and his brow was corded with the labor of memory. It is hard for a good man to summon up sins enough to make a decent confession; nearly always they fall back in the end upon the same worn and respectable category.

"I confess to the sin of pride," he pronounced slowly. "And to good deeds and kind acts undone; to moments of harshness and impatience--"

"Mista Matee Snow confessee?" Yen Sin shook a weary protest at the cheater wasting the precious moments with words. Mate Snow lifted his eyes, and I saw his face whiten and a pearl of sweat form on his forehead. A hush filled the close cave of light, a waiting silence,

oppressive and struck with a new expectancy. Little sounds on the dock above became important--young Gilman Pilot's voice, cautioning: "Here, best take my hand on that ladder, Mr. Malden. Last rung's carried away."

It was curious to see Mate Snow's face at that; it was as if one read the moving history of years in it as he leaned over the counter and touched the dying man's breast with a passion strange in him.

"I will tell you how wicked I am, Yen Sin. Three years ago I did Ginny Silva out of seventy dollars wages in the bogs; and if he's here tonight I'll pay him the last cent of it. And--and--" He appealed for mercy to the Chinaman's unshaken eyes. Then, hearing the minister on the deck behind, he cast in the desperate sop of truth. "*And--and I have coveted my neighbor's wife!*"

It was now that Minister Malden cried from the doorway: "That is nothing, Yen Sin--*nothing*--when you think of *me!*"

You may laugh. But just then, in that rocking death-chamber, with the sea and the dark and the wind, no one laughed. Except Yen Sin, perhaps; he may have smiled, though the mask of his features did not move. Minister Malden stepped into the room, and his face was like new ivory.

"Look at me! I have wanted to bring your soul to Christ before I died. That is white, but all the rest of me is black. I have lived a lie; I have broken a law of God; to cover that I have broken another, another--"

His voice hung in the air, filled with a strange horror of itself. The Chinaman fingered his collars. Without our consent or our understanding, he had done the thing which had so shocked us when he said it with his lips; the heathen sat in judgment, weighing the sins of our little world.

"Yes?" he seemed to murmur. "And then?"

The minister's eyes widened; pain lifted him on his toes.

"I am an adulterer," he cried. "And my child is a--a--bastard. Her mother's husband, Joshua Gibbs, didn't go down with his vessel after all. He was alive when I married her. He is alive today, a wanderer. He learned of things and sent me a letter; it found me at the Infield Conference the day before I came home that time to see my baby. Since that day it has seemed to me that I would suffer the eternity of the damned rather than that that stain should mar my child's life, and in the blackness of my heart I have believed that it wouldn't if it weren't known. I have kept him quiet; I have hushed up the truth. I have paid him money, leaving it for him where he wrote me to leave it. I have gone hungry and ragged to satisfy him. I have begged my living of a friend. I have drained the life of the woman I love. And yet he is never content. And I have betrayed even *him*. For he forbade me to see his wife ever again, or even to know the child I had begotten, and I have gone to them, in secret, by night. I have sinned not alone against God, but against the devil. I have sinned against--*everything!*"

* * *

The fire which had swept him on left him now of a sudden, his arms hung down at his sides, his head drooped. It was Mate Snow who broke the silence, falling back a step, as if he had been struck.

"God forgive me," he said in awe. "And *I* have kept you here. *You!* To preach the word of God to these people. God forgive me!"

"I think Mista God laugh, yes."

Yen Sin wasn't laughing himself; he was looking at his collars. Mate Snow shrugged his shoulders fiercely, impatient of the interruption.

"I have kept you here," he pursued bitterly, "for the good of my own soul, which would have liked to drive you away. I have kept you here, even when you wanted to go away--"

"Little mousie want to go away. Little cat say, 'no--no.'" Yen Sin's head turned slowly and he spoke on to the bit of yellow silk, his words clear and powerless as a voice in a dream. "No--no, Mousie, stay with little cat. Good little cat. Like see little mousie jump. Little cat!"

Mate Snow wheeled on him, and I saw a queer sight on his face for an instant; the gray wrinkles of age. My cousin Duncan was there, constable of Urkey village, and he saw it too and came a step out of his corner. It was all over in a wink; Mate Snow lifted his shoulders with a sigh, as much as to say: "You can see how far gone the poor fellow is."

The Chinaman, careless of the little by-play, went on.

"Mista Sam Kow nice China fella. Mista Minista go to Mista Sam Kow in Infield, washy colla. Mista Yen Sin lite a letta to Mista Sam Kow, on Mista Minista colla-band. See? Mista Sam Kow lite a letta back on colla-band. See?"

We saw--that the yellow man was no longer talking at random, but slowly, with his eyes on the collar he held in his hand, like a scholar in his closet, perusing the occult pages of a chronicle.

"Mista Sam Kow say: 'This man go night-time in Chestnut Stleet; pickee out letta undah sidewalk, stickee money-bag undah sidewalk, cly, shivah, makee allee same like sick fella. Walkee all lound town allee night. Allee same like Chlistian dlunk man. No sleepee. That's all--Sam Kow.' Mista Yen Sin keepee colla when Mista Minista come back; give new colla: one, two, five, seven time; Mista Minista say: 'You washy colla fine, Yen Sin: this colla, allee same like new.' Mista Matee Snow, his colla allee same like new, too--"

* * *

Something happened so suddenly that none of us knew what was going on. But there was my cousin Duncan standing by the counter, his arm and shoulder still thrust forward with the blow he had given; and there was our great man of the hill flung back against the wall with a haggard grimace set on his face.

"No, you don't!" Duncan growled, his voice shivering a little with excitement. "No, you don't, Mate!"

Mate Snow screamed, and his curse was like the end of the world in Urkey island.

"Curse you! The man's a thief, I tell you. He's stolen my property! I demand my property--those collars there in his hand now. You're constable, you say. Well, I want my--"

He let himself down on the bench, as if the strength had left his knees.

"He's going to tell you lies," he cried. "He's making fools of you all with his--his--Duncan, boy! Don't listen to the black liar. He's going to try and make out 'twas *me* put the letter under the walk in Chestnut Street, up there to Infield; that it was *me*, all these years, that went back and got out money he put there. *Me! Mate Snow*. Duncan, boy; he's going to tell you a low, black-hearted lie!"

"*How do you know?*" That was all my cousin Duncan said.

To the dying man, nothing made much difference. It was as if he had only paused to gather his failing breath, and when he spoke his tone was the same, detached, dispassionate, with a ghost of humor running through it.

"How many times?" He counted the collars with a finger tip. "One two, tlee, six, seven time. Seven yeahs. Too bad. Any time Mista Minista wantee confessee, Mista God makee allee light. Mista Yen Sin allee same like Mista God. Wait. Wait. Wait. Laugh. Cly inside!"

Mate Snow was leaning forward on the bench in a queer, lazy attitude, his face buried in his hands and his elbows propped on his knees. But no one looked at him, for Minister Malden was speaking in the voice of one risen from the dead, his eyes blinking at the Chinaman's lamp.

"Then you mean--you mean that he--isn't alive? After all? That he wasn't alive--*then*? You mean it was all a--a kind of a--*joke*? I--I--Oh, Mate! *Mate Snow!*"

It was queer to see him turning with his news to his traditional protector. It had been too sudden; his brain had been so taken up with the naked miracle that Gibbs was not alive that all the rest of it, the drawn-out and devious revenge of the druggist, had somehow failed to get into him as yet.

"Mate Snow!" he cried, running over to the sagging figure. "Did you hear, Mate? Eh? It isn't true! It was all a--a joke, Mate!" He shook Snow's shoulder with a pleading ecstasy. "It's been a mistake, Mate, and I am--she is--little Hope is--"

He fell back a step, letting the man lop over suddenly on his doubled knees, and stared blankly at a tiny drug-phial, uncorked and empty, rolling away across the floor. He passed a slow hand across his eyes. "Why--why--I--I'm afraid Mate is--isn't very--well."

Urkey had held its tongue too long. Now it was that the dam gave way and the torrent came whirling down and a hundred voices were lifted. Crowds and shadows distracted the light. One cried. "The man's dead, you fools; can't you see?" A dozen took it up and it ran out and away along the rumbling dock. "Doctor!" another bawled. "He's drank

poison! Where's the doctor at?" And that, too, went out, and a faint shout answered from somewhere shoreward that the doctor was out at Si Pilot's place and Miah White was after him, astraddle of the tar-wagon horse. Through it all I can remember Aunt Nickerson's wail continuing, undaunted and unquenchable, "God save our souls! God save our souls!"

And then, following the instinct of the frightened pack, they were all gone of a sudden, carrying the dead man to meet the doctor. I would have gone, too, and I had gotten as far as the door at their heels, when I paused to look back at the Chinaman.

He lay so still over there on the couch--the thought came to me that he, too, was dead. And of a sudden, leaning there on the door-frame, the phantom years trooped back to me, and I saw the man for the first time moving through them--a lone, far outpost of the thing he knew, one yellow man against ten thousand whites, unshaken, unappalled, facing the odds, working so early, so late, day after day and year after year, and smiling a little, perhaps, as he peeped behind the scenes of the thing which we call civilization. Yes, cry as he might inside, he must have smiled outside, sometimes, through those years of terror, at the sight of Minister Malden shrinking at the shadow of the ghost of something that was nothing, to vanish at a touch of light.

And now his foreign service was ended; his post was to be relieved; and he could go wherever he wanted to go.

Not quite yet. He had been dreaming, that was all. His eyes opened, and rested, not on me, but to the right of me. Then I saw for the first time that I wasn't alone in the room with him after all, but that Minister Malden was standing there, where he had stood through all the din like a little boy struck dumb before a sudden Christmas tree.

And like a little boy, he went red and white and began to stammer.

"I--I--Yen Sin--" He held his breath a moment. Then it came out all together. "*I'll run and fetch them--both!*" With that he was past me, out of the door and up the ladder, and I heard his light feet drumming on the dock, bearing such news as never was.

* * *

The Chinaman's eyes had come to me now, and there was a queer light in them that I couldn't understand. An adventure beyond my little comprehension was taking shape behind them, and all I knew enough to do was to sneak around behind the counter and take hold of one of his fingers and shake it up and down, like one man taking a day's leave of another. His eyes thanked me for my violence; then they were back again to their mysterious speculations. An overweening excitement gathered in them. He frightened me. Quite abruptly, as if an unexpected reservoir of energy had been tapped, the dying man lifted on an elbow and slid one leg over the edge of the couch. Then he glanced at me with an air almost furtive.

"Boy," he whispered. "Run quick gettee Mista Minista, yes."

"But he's coming *himself*," I protested. "You better lay back."

"Mista Yen Sin askee *please!* Please, boy."

What was there for me to do? I ran. Once on the dock above, misgivings assailed me. I was too young, and the night was too appalling. I had forgotten the wind, down in the cabin, but in the open here I felt its weight. It grew all the while; its voice drowned the world now, and there was spindrift through it, picked from the back shore of the island and flung all the way across. Objects were lost in it; ghostly things, shore lights, fish-houses, piers, strained seaward. I heard the packet's singing masts at the next wharf, but I saw no packet. The ponderous scow below me became a thing of life and light, an eager bird fluttering at its bonds and calling to the wide

spaces. To my bewildered eyes it seemed to move--it *was* moving, shaking off the heavy hands of bondage, joining itself with the wind. I got down on my knees of a sudden and peered at the deck.

"*Yen Sin!*" I screamed. "*What you doin' out there?*"

I saw him dimly in the open air outside his door, fumbling and fumbling at something. This was his great adventure, the thing that had gleamed in his eyes and had tapped that unguessed reservoir of strength. His voice crept back to me, harassed by the wind,

"This velly funny countly, Mista Boy. Mista Yen Sin go back China way."

His bow-line was fast to an iron ring on the wharf. I wanted to hold him back, and I clutched at the rope with my hands as if my little strength were something against that freed thing. The line came up to me easily, cast off from the scow at the other end.

He was waning. His window and door and the little fan-light before the door were all I could see now, and even that pattern blurred and became uncertain and ghostly on the mat of the night. He was clear of the wharves now, and the wind had him--sailing China way--so peaceful, so dreamless, surrounded by his tell-tale cargo of Urkey's unwashed collars.

* * *

I don't know how long it was I crouched there on the timbers, staring out into the havoc of that black night, and listening to the hungry clamor of the Bight. I must have been crying for the minister, over and over, without knowing it, for when my cousin Duncan's hand fell on my shoulder and I started up half out of my wits, he pointed a finger toward the outer edge of the wharf.

And there they were in a little close group, Sympathy Gibbs standing straight with the child in her arms, and Minister Malden down on his knees. There were many people on the pier, all with their eyes to sea, all except Sympathy Gibbs; hers were up-shore, where Mate Snow lay in state on his own counter, all his sweet revenge behind him and gone.

I thought little Hope was asleep in the swathing shawl, till I saw the dark round spots of her eyes. If it was a strange night for the others, it was stranger still to her.

The wind and the rain beat on Minister Malden's bended back. He loved it that way. The missionary was praying for the soul of the heathen.