

SHORT STORY PRIZE

MY ASIAN PARTNER

It was not the head of a fur seal as we on the good ship EDINA first thought but, seen through binoculars, it was a buoy, black and low in the water and what appeared to be a light band around it proved to be the arms of a man, his long hair floating kelplike in the water.

To all appearances he was dead when we placed him in the row-boat, launched from our steamer. Back there this waif of the sea was taken below, and laid upon a berth where I forced some spirits between his lips and vigorously massaged his body. After a few minutes he sighed and opened his eyes. There I left him to recover while I joined my companions on deck to admire some of the islands in the neighbourhood of Indonesia.

An hour later, much to our astonishment, the newcomer manifested himself on deck by throwing himself at my feet and claiming me as his saviour. In a queer English jargon he swore by everything in the barbaric calendar that he would serve me for the rest of my life and his, and that night, curled up on a carpet in my stateroom, he told me his story; before he had finished I had placed him in a niche of his own as something unique in the line of liars.

He was born on one of the islands of the Malay archipelago and during a varied career this excrescence of the waves had in turn been sailor, captain and freebooter, sailing his own piratical craft over the waters of the China coast, being often chased by a cruiser into one of the hundred hiding places he knew. But prompted by the fact that the cruiser's smoke appeared often in the sky, he sold out and, being a polyglot of Oriental tongues, he became a leisured interpreter at a Chinese legation.

During his leisure he met an American merchant who suggested they trade together in Chinese opium, the Yankee to provide the capital. This suited the interpreter and he went up the Yangtse-Kiang where he obtained a boatload of the drug and ran it down to the coast to hand over to the American. They continued to do well for some time but the cost of Government taxes was heavy so they decided to dodge the tax-man and run for the open sea to meet. But the Yangtse-Kiang mandarin found something suspicious about their "dodge-'em" exploits and my friend was forced to become circumspect. However there were other mandarins on the river and he managed to stow most of the steamer's cargo before the matter was brought to imperial notice, and a cruiser sent to the river's mouth. He was scudding before a fair breeze when the cruiser threw a shot across his bows.

Remembering what punishment awaited him if caught, he crowded on sail and was blown out of the water - or, rather, into it - whence he was rescued by our boat.

While he talked I conceived the idea that this person might be of service to me on the mission on which I had been sent by our New York house, the house which owned the EDINA and many another steamer trading in the China seas.

"Would you venture into the Yangtse again?" I enquired.

"Why not? The cruiser has reported the sinking of my junk and I am dead to everyone on board. No one is so safe from discovery as he who is dead", he said.

Three hundred miles up the great river was the city of Nanking and here our house had negotiated for large quantities of tea. But no tea had been forwarded despite an advance for six thousand chests having been paid. It was my mission to procure these chests without again paying for them, and on my long trip east I had cudgelled my brains for some means of accomplishing my errand. Success meant a partnership - and it was worth it. Until I had listened to the story of this waif I was barren of ideas, but now I would pit this bright islander against the Chinese scoundrels who had defrauded our house.

From time to time I told my companion, who I had christened Tom, about my errand, and from him came the suggestion that echoed my design.

"You would fail", he said, "but I will win. I know the country and the people. I may even know why your agent didn't ship your tea. You have never heard from him because I believe he is really dead, not like me. It is the tax-gatherer who has your money, and I shall get it back for you."

"If you do, Tom, I shall make you my partner in business of our own", I promised.

On the next steamer we took passage to Shanghai where I was to remain while Tom visited Nanking. I bade him farewell, expecting to hear from him by return boat, but the next day I was informed that one, Lem Yen, desired to see me.

I found my visitor in my own parlour. The man was richly dressed, bowed low, shook hands with himself, as is the Chinese custom, and spoke in broken English, sufficiently clear for me to understand.

"I am from San Francisco and you are from New York. You are in China to buy tea at Nanking and pay for it in promises, and nothing else."

I was entirely overcome. "How did you know what brought me to Shanghai", I managed to gasp.

"Because you told me when we were on board the EDINA", he replied.

It was Tom, so completely disguised that recognition was impossible.

"I am now Lem Yen, of San Francisco. I go to Nanking today. I go to succeed. To do so I must have your trust, even as you trust yourself. I need twelve hundred yen to buy off the tax-gatherer there six thousand chests of tea - with promises. I shall say "Get for me tea of the best quality; for I must return by the next boat. When you have loaded six thousand chests of tea on board I shall give you one thousand yen plus the price of the tea, which must be of the best quality. I am rich. I am the merchant Lem yen, of San Francisco."

Tom's eyes flashed. "When the chests of tea have been loaded it will be too late to buy for our own adventure, so that if you desire to use me on this plan later, give me ten thousand yen in gold to make our own purchases beside the amount I shall give to the tax-gatherer."

What spirit possessed me I do not know. I gave the man all the money he asked for and took in exchange nothing but an order on our Yokohama house for "all goods consigned to Lem Yen". Then, with a shake of his bony hand, my friend was gone.

In addition to my money Tom carried an order for the captain of the COURIER on which the chests of tea would be loaded, to bypass Shanghai and steam straight for Yokohama. After I bade him farewell there commenced a miserable month of waiting for the COURIER's appearance.

Our Shanghai agent must have become very tired of me after my daily enquiries, but suddenly one day our Shanghai captain rushed in with information that the steamer COURIER had passed in mid-stream at full speed down the river without as much as exchanging signals with our Shanghai house. The excitement of the ship's appearance and disappearance passed quickly and soon I was away in her wake.

I found the atmosphere at the Yokohama agency cool in the extreme, but I also found tier upon tier of tea chests labelled "Lem Yen, Yokohama" in the company's warehouse. Beside these chests there were five hundred marked "Lem Yen (Diamond A) San Francisco"; also one thousand chests of nut-oil marked similarly.

I thought I recognised our venture in the Diamond A goods. All that remained was to await the arrival of my partner, before crossing the ocean to claim the reward of my successful mission and after the COURIER docked I asked the captain "All your passengers ashore?"

"All except a sick Chinaman named Lem yen who is lying in the stateroom down below on the tourist deck."

I had found my faithful friend. He was stretched upon a berth, only a shadow of his former self, but his eyes still glowed as he put out a bony hand.

His was a story full of peril, of dangers met and overcome that he might keep his faith. I was impressed by his sincerity and called him a man, which glowed his cheeks with pride.

As soon as our goods could be stowed aboard the EDINA I had him moved to that vessel and before we had been at sea two weeks he was his old self.

When I told him my next trip was to Mexico, and I thought he had not used much judgement in buying so much nut-oil, he said "In San Francisco there are thousands of Chinamen. Identify me as Lem Yen, merchant, clear one hundred cases of nut-oil at the customs house, and when you return from Mexico I will give you an account of our venture."

I wrote the certificate at the office of the house, cleared the nut-oil as he desired and arranged that he should meet me there on my return.

I was busy at my desk informing the house of my second successful trip when Lem yen appeared and invited me to accompany him to where he would give me his account, and in a booth in a local bank, he gave me a long explanation of how the cases of nut-oil showed so much profit for the partners.

From an oilskin pouch he handed me a folded certificate made out in my name for forty thousand dollars. I was speechless, but there were more surprises for me. There were twenty certificates ranging in value from five to forty thousand dollars, which were from the sales of the tea and the nut-oil.

"But it is impossible! How could nut-oil bring forty dollars a gallon - four hundred dollars a case?" I asked.

"You gave me ten thousand yen to buy goods for us and to sell them again. The goods are sold and this is the money for them. I have stolen none from you or from those who bought the goods."

"Yes, but who would buy nut-oil from you at such an awful figure?"

"My friend, Han Yack, bought four hundred cans of nut-oil in one hundred cases and he paid me thirty thousand dollars for them because he found in each can two smaller cans of five pounds each, held in place by strips of tin and around which the oil flowed. In each of the smaller cans he found opium which was full of golden dreams. When he told his friends about the cans they bought them wherever my friend happened to be, and that explains why we have so much money between us at last."

"Do you know you ran the risk of spending the rest of the year in gaol and losing all our money?"

"You were a thousand miles away when I paid for your thousands of cases of tea with promises because the tax-gatherer was a thief. We're surrounded by thieves, you and me, and you've got to be better than the rest of them."

"Oh, Tom, you are a sad rogue" I said, but then I remembered that I had suggested the partnership if he retrieved the stolen tea chests.

There was no arguing with this barbarian. A month had passed since the oil had been sold and by now it was scattered from Vancouver to Mexico. My wily partner had been careful to clean up the transaction long before my return, and I now remembered also that I myself had paid the customs charges on a hundred cases before I left for Mexico, so I could do nothing but harm by informing the customs this late in the day.

I swept the certificates into the pouch. "How much of this money belongs to you?" I asked him.

"Fifty thousand yen to build a fast ship and ten thousand beside"

I endorsed three certificates totalling a hundred thousand dollars and handed them to him.

"We will do no more trade together, Tom, for we do it differently. I saved your life; you risked it again for me. You have paid the debt and we will bid each other farewell while we are close friends. Your ways are the wind and the waves, mine is now the desk and on occasions the big steamers."

"My ways are the ways of the winds and the waves and the rough water that I love, and were I ten times as rich I would use all my riches to hunt adventure. Without me your mission would have failed and upon such failures are strewn the wrecks of lives. And now, my friend, I bid you a sad farewell."

He made a deep obeisance, and strode to the door and as I watched him push his way through the throng, I sighed. Freebooter my Tom would be until he died, but I had seen none but his greater qualities, his bright intelligence and his sterling friendship. In the course of our varied wanderings, if we should meet again I should know him for a fearless man whose word was his bond. I could not forget that he had proved a worthy staff upon which to lean.