

AN ORIENTAL PARTNERSHIP

It was on one of those splendid mornings when the sky blends tints of turquoise and topaz that we sighted an object bobbing about in the sparkling waters of the Timor Sea and on closer inspection from the bows of my trading schooner Aphrasia it proved to be a cask around which were the encircling arms of a man. Brought on board his form was rigid, but there was a slight flutter in the bony chest which encouraged work. I forced apart the set teeth and forced some whisky between them. I chafed his limbs and body and presently he opened his eyes and sighed.

The waif was taken below and I forgot him for a couple of hours. Then the rescued manifested himself by coming up on deck, falling at my feet and claiming me as his saviour. He swore by every good thing in the barbaric calendar that Kokomate would serve me the rest of his life. He spoke fairly good English and later that morning, wrapped up in a rug, he told me his story, which would place him as something unique in the line of liars.

Born in one of the islands off Indonesia this excrescence of the sea had a varied career having been in turn sailor, freebooter and captain of his own piratical craft in these waters. It was after an avenging cruiser had forced him into one of the many hiding places which he knew that he sold his boat, and went to Jakarta. Here someone connected with the Chinese legation discovered his talent - he was a polyglot of Oriental tongues - and he was appointed an interpreter.

During this leisure time he made the acquaintance of an American who proposed some joint operations in opium running so, deserting the legation and being armed with a plentiful supply of dollars by the American, he made his way to the China coast and went up the Yangste-Kiang, where he made some profitable deals and shipped the product of the poppy to his new-found friend on the coast.

Although the first cost was heavy and Government excise cut into their profits, Kokomate was soon able to fit out a small junk with his portion and, when the American returned to the Korean coast later, the ex-interpreter sailed south hoping to enrich himself in his home waters.

Here amid the Indonesian islands he was forced to be more circumspect and was doing well for himself when he was approached by an acquaintance of the legation days who suggested that he would show a huge profit by taking a secret cargo from Timor across to the Wessell islands off the Australian coast. The bargain was struck and the sum agreed upon for the hire of the junk was such that Kokomate had no doubt that the cargo comprised dope - heroin perhaps.

But that was not his business he said and scudding before a fair breeze he was approaching the eastern coast of Timor when the whole ocean erupted and the junk and Kokomate were blown out of the water, by what he did not know. A wartime mine, I guessed, as that area was thickly sewn with them many years before. He was lucky to find a floating cask to which he clung until the advent of the Aphrasia.

While Kokomate talked, I conceived the idea that he could be of service to me on the mission on which I had been sent by our Sydney house, the house which owned the Aphrasia and many another small vessel besides.

"Would you venture into the Yangste again?" I asked.

"Why not?" he replied. "I've been so long away from it they must think I'm dead, and there is no one so safe from discovery as he who is dead".

Three hundred ^{miles} up the Yangste-Kiang is Nanking where our house had negotiated for six hundred chests of tea, the value of which had been paid to the sellers' agent. However, not one chest had materialised, and it was my mission to procure it without again paying for it. Until I had heard the story of this waif I was barren of ideas, but now I would pit my bright islander against the Chinese scoundrels who had robbed us.

I studied him closely, and became convinced of his capacity. I hoped also for his integrity. From time to time I told him something of my errand, and from him came the suggestion which echoed my designs.

"You will fail", Kokomate said. "Because I know the country and the people well, I will succeed. I can guess why your agent did not ship the tea. Because, I believe, he is dead. It is the tax gatherer who has collected the money. Kwangfu they are called and we must be sure that our business does not end like your agent".

"If you succeed with this business I will make you my partner in speculation of our own", I promised.

On the next boat from Jakarta we took passage for Shanghai, where I was to remain while Kokomate visited Nanking. I bade him farewell, expecting to hear from him by return boat, and disguised as a tourist named Yem Len, of San Francisco, he headed north. What possessed me I do not know, but I gave this man all the money I had and some for which I had signed promissary notes, in exchange for which I received an order on our Yokohama house for "all goods consigned to Yem Len". In addition to his passage order Kokomate carried an order from the company to run direct to Yokohama, by-passing Shanghai.

Weeks had passed and there had been no sign of our vessel in the big river and I had had forebodings which kept me awake at night, when one morning our port^{clerk} rushed in with news that our boat passed in mid-stream at full speed, not so much as signalling our Shanghai house.

In no time at all I was on my way to Yokohama in the wake of our flying steamer, but I found the atmosphere at our agency there distinctly chilly, for there were tier upon tier of tea chests labelled "Yem Len" filling the company's warehouse. When I produced an order for the delivery of the whole consignment, and explained that my mission had ended successfully, the unbending of the agent was something to see.

Beside the six thousands chests, there were five hundred marked "Yem Len (diamond A), San Francisco"; also one thousand chests of nut-oil and sixty bales of "Crape", marked similarly. In these "diamond A" goods I thought I recognised our venture. All I had to do now was to await the arrival of my partner before crossing the water to claim the reward of my success.

After a couple of weeks of idling around the town, and there being no appearance of Kokomate, I began to feel ill at ease, and the old habit of haunting the waterfront took possession of me.

The Mercury was poking her black nose past the Bay headlands on her subsequent trip and, though ^{she was} still far distant, I decided to wait at the dock.

"All your passengers ashore?" I asked the captain as the holds were being opened up.

"Yes", he said. "All except a sick Chinamen in one of the staterooms".

"What's his name?" I asked without ~~without~~ feeling much interest.

"Yem Len, merchant, San Francisco".

At last I had found him. I hastened below. He was stretched upon a berth, a shadow of his former self, but with the fire still glowing in his eyes as he stretched out his bony fingers.

"I knew you would come", he said, retaining my hand in his.

His was a story full of peril, of dangers met and overcome that he might keep his faith. He said it was all to get even with the customs men who he didn't like, but when I pressed his hand and told him that I thought he was a fine man, his cheeks glowed with pride and the pressure of his fingers was eloquent.

As soon as our goods could be stowed aboard the schooner I had my partner transferred to her, and before we had been at sea a week he was staggering around the deck on my arm; in an other week he was his old self.

I told him that he had not used good judgment in the purchase of such a large quantity of nut-oil, and told him his share of the profits would be small.

"Neither of us was in China because of our health?" "No", I admitted.

"In San Francisco there are thirty thousand Chinamen. You go from there to Mexico. Identify me as Yem Lin, merchant, of San Frisco, when we are in port, clear one hundred cases of oil at the Customs house, and when you return I will give you an account of our venture".

I wrote the certificate at our house office, cleared the nut-oil as he ~~desired~~ desired, and arranged that he should meet me there upon my return, and I didn't hear more of him until nearly two months later when Yem Lin, merchant, entered my house office.

"Come with me and I will give you an accounting", he said.

We entered a booth in the Bank of California, and closed the door. From somewhere upon his person, Mokomate drew an oilskin pouch, and handed it to me. It was filled with pieces of folded paper. I opened one and found that it was a deposit slip made out in my name for the sum of thirty thousand dollars.

I was speechless, but more surprises were in store for me. There were twenty slips, running from five dollars to twenty thousand each.

"This is impossible", I said. "How could nut-oil bring forty dollars a/gallon?" I asked.

"It is from the oil and the crape and the tea", my Oriental partner responded. "My health was good; you were not in China for your health. You gave me ten thousand yen with which to buy goods; these were to buy and sell again. The goods ~~are~~ are sold; this is the money for them, except that which I have lived upon since you were away. I have stolen nothing from you or from anyone else".

"Yes, but who would buy nut-oil at such an extraordinary figure?"

"I have a friend in San Francisco, Hen Yeck, who bought one hundred cases and he paid me thirty thousand dollars; and then he told many friends that he could buy many cans of oil, and in the middle of each of these cans there were two small cans of five pounds each around which the oil ^{flowed} freely. These were held in place by strips of tin, and in these smaller tins there was such opium as he had not seen since he had left his homeland. It was full of golden dreams, and he would sell it for forty dollars, and one dollar for the oil. For his kindness I gave my friend Hen Yeck one dollar for each small can he sold. That is the end of my story!"

"So in each case of oil you had hidden eight cans of opium. Do you know that you ran the risk of spending the rest of your life in gaol, and losing all my money? What would the custom people say if they knew of this?"

"I ran the risk of spending some time in a vat of boiling Chinese oil when I bought your thousands of tea chests with promises; gaol is an easier way to spend one's life. The customs men looked at the cases after I had pried the covers off and made holes in the cans of oil which they said were full of very good nut-oil. They told me how much to pay, and I paid it. Am I to pay for what the customs men have done themselves?"

"Oh, Kokomate, you are a sad rogue! You have placed me in a sad position!"

"But", he protested, "you were a thousand miles away; you were not in the position like I was".

There was no arguing with this barbarian. A month had passed since the oil was sold, and it was scattered from Vancouver to Mexico by now. My wily partner had been careful to clean up the transaction long before my return, and I could do nothing but harm by informing the customs people at this late time. Inevitably suspicion would fall upon me, for I remembered now that I had paid the customs charges on one hundred cases before I left for Mexico. There was but one course --

silence. I swept the slips into the pouch.

"How much of this belongs to you?" I asked him.

"About fifty thousand yen to build a fast ship, and ten thousand yen more".

I endorsed three slips aggregating one hundred thousand dollars for him.

"Our business is at an end", I said, handing him the slips. "I will do no more with you, for we do it differently. Your ways are the way of the wind and the waves; mine are the quiet ways I have been taught. Go again then to these ways where you will be happiest".

He took my hand. "With you I have been happy, for your course has been laid through the rough waters that I love. That I have paid my debt to you I believe, for out of danger I have brought you success and a store of gold. You will venture no more on the stormy seas of fortune, but I must have adventure or I should die of a broken heart. Our meeting was the work of fate. Without your aid my days had reached their end. Without my aid your mission would have failed and upon such failures are strewn the wrecks of lives. Farewell, my friend", and he stood back, made a deep obeisance, and strode to the door. I watched him disappear among the throng, and when I had lost sight of him I sighed for a lost partner.

Freebooter my Kokomate would be until he died; but I had seen none save his noble qualities, his bright intelligence, his courage and his sterling friendship. In the course of my busy wanderings from my Sydney home, 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 staff upon which to lean.