

CHAPTER 21

TIME wore on and seemingly brought us no nearer, or very little nearer, to our goal. So carefully had my friend Nayland Smith excluded the matter from the press that, whilst public interest was much engaged with some of the events in the skein of mystery which he had come from Burma to unravel, outside the Secret Service and the special department of Scotland Yard few people recognized that the several murders, robberies and disappearances formed each a link in a chain; fewer still were aware that a baneful presence was in our midst, that a past master of the evil arts lay concealed somewhere in the metropolis; searched for by the keenest wits which the authorities could direct to the task, but eluding all--triumphant, contemptuous.

One link in that chain Smith himself for long failed to recognize. Yet it was a big and important link.

"Petrie," he said to me one morning, "listen to this:

...In sight of Shanghai--a clear, dark night. On board the deck of a junk passing close to seaward of the Andaman a blue flare started up. A minute later there was a cry of "Man overboard!"

Mr. Lewin, the chief officer, who was in charge, stopped the engines. A boat was put out. But no one was recovered. There are sharks in these waters. A fairly heavy sea was running.

Inquiry showed the missing man to be a James Edwards, second class, booked to Shanghai. I think the name was assumed. The man was some sort of Oriental, and we had had him under close observation....

"That's the end of their report," exclaimed Smith.

He referred to the two C.I.D. men who had joined the Andaman at the moment of her departure from Tilbury.

He carefully lighted his pipe.

"IS it a victory for China, Petrie?" he said softly.

"Until the great war reveals her secret resources--and I pray that the day be not in my time--we shall never know," I replied.

Smith began striding up and down the room,

"Whose name," he jerked abruptly, "stands now at the head of our danger list?"

He referred to a list which we had compiled of the notable men intervening between the evil genius who secretly had invaded London and the triumph of his cause--the triumph of the yellow races.

I glanced at our notes. "Lord Southery," I replied.

Smith tossed the morning paper across to me.

"Look," he said shortly. "He's dead."

I read the account of the peer's death, and glanced at the long obituary notice; but no more than glanced at it. He had but recently returned from the East, and now, after a short illness, had died from some affection of the heart. There had been no intimation that his illness was of a serious nature, and even Smith, who watched over his flock-- the flock threatened by the wolf, Fu-Manchu--with jealous zeal, had not suspected that the end was so near.

"Do you think he died a natural death, Smith?" I asked.

My friend reached across the table and rested the tip of a long ringer upon one of the sub-headings to the account:

"SIR FRANK NARCOMBE SUMMONED TOO LATE."

"You see," said Smith, "Southery died during the night, but Sir Frank Narcombe, arriving a few minutes later, unhesitatingly pronounced death to be due to syncope, and seems to have noticed nothing suspicious."

I looked at him thoughtfully.

"Sir Frank is a great physician," I said slowly; "but we must remember he would be looking for nothing suspicious."

"We must remember," rapped Smith, "that, if Dr. Fu-Manchu is responsible for Southery's death, except to the eye of an expert there would be nothing suspicious to see. Fu-Manchu leaves no clews."

"Are you going around?" I asked.

Smith shrugged his shoulders.

"I think not," he replied. "Either a greater One than Fu-Manchu has taken Lord Southery, or the yellow doctor has done his work so well that no trace remains of his presence in the matter."

Leaving his breakfast untasted, he wandered aimlessly about the room, littering the hearth with matches as he constantly relighted his pipe, which went out every few minutes.

"It's no good, Petrie," he burst out suddenly; "it cannot be a coincidence. We must go around and see him."

An hour later we stood in the silent room, with its drawn blinds and its deathful atmosphere, looking down at the pale, intellectual face of Henry Stradwick, Lord Southery, the greatest engineer of his day. The mind that lay behind that splendid brow had planned the construction of the railway for which Russia had paid so great a price, had conceived the scheme for the canal which, in the near future, was to bring two great continents, a full week's journey nearer one to the other. But now it would plan no more.

"He had latterly developed symptoms of angina pectoris," explained the family physician; "but I had not anticipated a fatal termination so soon. I was called about two o'clock this morning, and found Lord Southery in a dangerously exhausted condition. I did all that was possible, and Sir Frank Narcombe was sent for. But shortly before his arrival the patient expired."

"I understand, Doctor, that you had been treating Lord Southery for angina pectoris?" I said.

"Yes," was the reply, "for some months."

"You regard the circumstances of his end as entirely consistent with a death from that cause?"

"Certainly. Do you observe anything unusual yourself? Sir Frank Narcombe quite agrees with me. There is surely no room for doubt?"

"No," said Smith, tugging reflectively at the lobe of his left ear. "We do not question the accuracy of your diagnosis in any way, sir."

The physician seemed puzzled.

"But am I not right in supposing that you are connected with the police?" asked the physician.

"Neither Dr. Petrie nor myself are in any way connected with the police," answered Smith. "But, nevertheless, I look to you to regard our recent questions as confidential."

As we were leaving the house, hushed awesomely in deference to the unseen visitor who had touched Lord Southery with gray, cold fingers, Smith paused, detaining a black-coated man who passed us on the stairs.

"You were Lord Southery's valet?"

The man bowed.

"Were you in the room at the moment of his fatal seizure?"

"I was, sir."

"Did you see or hear anything unusual--anything unaccountable?"

"Nothing, sir."

"No strange sounds outside the house, for instance?"

The man shook his head, and Smith, taking my arm, passed out into the street.

"Perhaps this business is making me imaginative," he said; "but there seems to be something tainting the air in yonder-- something peculiar to houses whose doors bear the invisible death-mark of Fu-Manchu."

"You are right, Smith!" I cried. "I hesitated to mention the matter, but I, too, have developed some other sense which warns me of the Doctor's presence. Although there is not a scrap of confirmatory evidence, I am as sure that he has brought about Lord Southery's death as if I had seen him strike the blow."

It was in that torturing frame of mind--chained, helpless, in our ignorance, or by reason of the Chinaman's supernormal genius--that we lived throughout the ensuing days. My friend began to look like a man consumed by a burning fever. Yet, we could not act.

In the growing dark of an evening shortly following I stood idly turning over some of the works exposed for sale outside a second-hand bookseller's in New Oxford Street. One dealing with the secret societies of China struck me as being likely to prove instructive, and I was about to call the shopman when I was startled to feel a hand clutch my arm.

I turned around rapidly--and was looking into the darkly beautiful eyes of Karamaneh! She--whom I had seen in so many guises-- was dressed in a perfectly fitting walking habit, and had much of her wonderful hair concealed beneath a fashionable hat.

She glanced about her apprehensively.

"Quick! Come round the corner. I must speak to you," she said, her musical voice thrilling with excitement.

I never was quite master of myself in her presence. He must have been a man of ice who could have been, I think for her beauty had all the bouquet of rarity; she was a mystery--and mystery adds charm to a woman. Probably she should have been under arrest, but I know I would have risked much to save her from it.

As we turned into a quiet thoroughfare she stopped and said:

"I am in distress. You have often asked me to enable you to capture Dr. Fu-Manchu. I am prepared to do so."

I could scarcely believe that I heard right.

"Your brother--" I began.

She seized my arm entreatingly, looking into my eyes.

"You are a doctor," she said. "I want you to come and see him now."

"What! Is he in London?"

"He is at the house of Dr. Fu-Manchu."

"And you would have me ---"

"Accompany me there, yes."

Nayland Smith, I doubted not, would have counseled me against trusting my life in the hands of this girl with the pleading eyes. Yet I did so, and with little hesitation; shortly we were traveling eastward in a closed cab. Karamaneh was very silent, but always when I turned to her I found her big eyes fixed upon me with an expression in which there was pleading, in which there was sorrow, in which there was something else--something indefinable, yet strangely disturbing. The cabman she had directed to drive to the lower end of the Commercial Road, the neighborhood of the new docks, and the scene of one of our early adventures with Dr. Fu-Manchu. The mantle of dusk had closed about the squalid activity of the East End streets as we neared our destination. Aliens of every shade of color were about us now, emerging from burrow-like alleys into the glare of the lamps upon the main road. In the short space of the drive we had passed from the bright world of the West into the dubious underworld of the East.

I do not know that Karamaneh moved; but in sympathy, as we neared the abode of the sinister Chinaman, she crept nearer to me, and when the cab was discharged, and together we walked down a narrow turning leading riverward, she clung to me fearfully, hesitated, and even seemed upon the point of turning back. But, overcoming her fear or repugnance, she led on, through a maze of alleyways and courts, wherein I hopelessly lost my bearings, so that it came home to me how wholly I was in the hands of this girl whose history was so full of shadows, whose real character was so inscrutable, whose beauty, whose charm truly might mask the cunning of a serpent.

I spoke to her.

"S-SH!" She laid her hand upon my arm, enjoining me to silence.

The high, drab brick wall of what looked like some part of a dock building loomed above us in the darkness, and the indescribable stench of the lower Thames were borne to my nostrils through a gloomy, tunnel-like opening, beyond which whispered the river. The muffled clangor of waterside activity was about us. I heard a key grate in a lock, and Karamaneh drew me into the shadow of an open door, entered, and closed it behind her.

For the first time I perceived, in contrast to the odors of the court without, the fragrance of the peculiar perfume which now I had come to associate with her. Absolute darkness was about us, and by this perfume alone I knew that she, was near to me, until her hand touched mine, and I was led along an uncarpeted passage and up an uncarpeted stair. A second door was unlocked, and I found myself in an exquisitely furnished room, illuminated by the soft light of a shaded lamp which stood upon a low, inlaid table amidst a perfect ocean of silken cushions, strewn upon a Persian carpet, whose yellow richness was lost in the shadows beyond the circle of light.

Karamaneh raised a curtain draped before a doorway, and stood listening intently for a moment.

The silence was unbroken.

Then something stirred amid the wilderness of cushions, and two tiny bright eyes looked up at me. Peering closely, I succeeded in distinguishing, crouched in that soft luxuriance, a little ape. It was Dr. Fu-Manchu's marmoset. "This way," whispered Karamaneh.

Never, I thought, was a staid medical man committed to a more unwise enterprise, but so far I had gone, and no consideration of prudence could now be of avail.

The corridor beyond was thickly carpeted. Following the direction of a faint light which gleamed ahead, it proved to extend as a balcony across one end of a spacious apartment. Together we stood high up there in the shadows, and looked down upon such a scene as I never could have imagined to exist within many a mile of that district.

The place below was even more richly appointed than the room into which first we had come. Here, as there, piles of cushions formed splashes of gaudy color about the floor. Three lamps hung by chains from the ceiling, their light softened by rich silk shades. One wall was almost entirely occupied by glass cases containing chemical apparatus, tubes, retorts and other less orthodox indications of Dr. Fu-Manchu's pursuits, whilst close against another lay the most extraordinary object of a sufficiently extraordinary room-- a low couch, upon which was extended the motionless form of a boy. In the light of a lamp which hung directly above him, his olive face showed an almost startling resemblance to that of Karamaneh-- save that the girl's coloring was more delicate. He had black, curly hair, which stood out prominently against the white covering upon which he lay, his hands crossed upon his breast.

Transfixed with astonishment, I stood looking down upon him. The wonders of the "Arabian Nights" were wonders no longer, for here, in East-End London, was a true magician's palace, lacking not its beautiful slave lacking not its enchanted prince!

"It is Aziz, my brother," said Karamaneh.

We passed down a stairway on to the floor of the apartment. Karamaneh knelt and bent over the boy, stroking his hair and whispering to him lovingly. I, too, bent over him; and I shall never forget the anxiety in the girl's eyes as she watched me eagerly whilst I made a brief examination.

Brief, indeed, for even ere I had touched him I knew that the comely shell held no spark of life. But Karamaneh fondled the cold hands, and spoke softly in that Arabic tongue which long before I had divined must be her native language.

Then, as I remained silent, she turned and looked at me, read the truth in my eyes, and rose from her knees, stood rigidly upright, and clutched me tremblingly.

"He is not dead--he is NOT dead!" she whispered, and shook me as a child might, seeking to arouse me to a proper understanding. "Oh, tell me he is not ---"

"I cannot," I replied gently, "for indeed he is."

"No!" she said, wild-eyed, and raising her hands to her face as though half distraught. "You do not understand--yet you are a doctor. You do not understand ---"

She stopped, moaning to herself and looking from the handsome face of the boy to me. It was pitiful; it was uncanny. But sorrow for the girl predominated in my mind.

Then from somewhere I heard a sound which I had heard before in houses occupied by Dr. Fu-Manchu--that of a muffled gong.

"Quick!" Karamaneh had me by the arm. "Up! He has returned!"

She fled up the stairs to the balcony, I close at her heels. The shadows veiled us, the thick carpet deadened the sound of our tread, or certainly we must have been detected by the man who entered the room we had just quitted.

It was Dr. Fu-Manchu!

Yellow-robed, immobile, the inhuman green eyes glittering catlike even, it seemed, before the light struck them, he threaded his way through the archipelago of cushions and bent over the couch of Aziz.

Karamaneh dragged me down on to my knees.

"Watch!" she whispered. "Watch!"

Dr. Fu-Manchu felt for the pulse of the boy whom a moment since I had pronounced dead, and, stepping to the tall glass case, took out a long-necked flask of chased gold, and from it, into a graduated glass, he poured some drops of an amber liquid wholly unfamiliar to me. I watched him with all my eyes, and noted how high the liquid rose in the measure. He charged a needle-syringe, and, bending again over Aziz, made an injection.

Then all the wonders I had heard of this man became possible, and with an awe which any other physician who had examined Aziz must have felt, I admitted him a miracle-worker. For as I watched, all but breathless, the dead came to life! The glow of health crept upon the olive cheek--the boy moved-- he raised his hands above his head--he sat up, supported by the Chinese doctor!

Fu-Manchu touched some hidden bell. A hideous yellow man with a scarred face entered, carrying a tray upon which were a bowl containing some steaming fluid, apparently soup, what looked like oaten cakes, and a flask of red wine.

As the boy, exhibiting no more unusual symptoms than if he had just awakened from a normal sleep, commenced his repast, Karamaneh drew me gently along the passage into the room which we had first entered. My heart leaped wildly as the marmoset bounded past us to drop hand over hand to the lower apartment in search of its master.

"You see," said Karamaneh, her voice quivering, "he is not dead! But without Fu-Manchu he is dead to me. How can I leave him when he holds the life of Aziz in his hand?"

"You must get me that flask, or some of its contents," I directed. "But tell me, how does he produce the appearance of death?"

"I cannot tell you," she replied. "I do not know. It is something in the wine. In another hour Aziz will be again as you saw him. But see." And, opening a little ebony box, she produced a phial half filled with the amber liquid.

"Good!" I said, and slipped it into my pocket. "When will be the best time to seize Fu-Manchu and to restore your brother?"

"I will let you know," she whispered, and, opening the door, pushed me hurriedly from the room. "He is going away to-night to the north; but you must not come to-night. Quick! Quick! Along the passage. He may call me at any moment."

So, with the phial in my pocket containing a potent preparation unknown to Western science, and with a last long look into the eyes of Karamaneh, I passed out into the narrow alley, out from the fragrant perfumes of that mystery house into the place of Thames-side stench.

CHAPTER 22

"WE must arrange for the house to be raided without delay," said Smith. "This time we are sure of our ally--"

"But we must keep our promise to her," I interrupted.

"You can look after that, Petrie," my friend said. "I will devote the whole of my attention to Dr. Fu-Manchu!" he added grimly.

Up and down the room he paced, gripping the blackened briar between his teeth, so that the muscles stood out squarely upon his lean jaws. The bronze which spoke of the Burmese sun enhanced the brightness of his gray eyes.

"What have I all along maintained?" he jerked, looking back at me across his shoulder-- "that, although Karamaneh was one of the strongest weapons in the Doctor's armory, she was one which some day would be turned against him. That day has dawned."

"We must await word from her."

"Quite so."

He knocked out his pipe on the grate. Then:

"Have you any idea of the nature of the fluid in the phial?"

"Not the slightest. And I have none to spare for analytical purposes."

Nayland Smith began stuffing mixture into the hot pipe-bowl, and dropping an almost equal quantity on the floor.

"I cannot rest, Petrie," he said. "I am itching to get to work. Yet, a false move, and--" He lighted his pipe, and stood staring from the window.

"I shall, of course, take a needle-syringe with me," I explained.

Smith made no reply.

"If I but knew the composition of the drug which produced the semblance of death," I continued, "my fame would long survive my ashes."

My friend did not turn. But:

"She said it was something he put in the wine?" he jerked.

"In the wine, yes."

Silence fell. My thoughts reverted to Karamaneh, whom Dr. Fu-Manchu held in bonds stronger than any slave-chains. For, with Aziz, her brother, suspended between life and death, what could she do save obey the mandates of the cunning Chinaman? What perverted genius was his! If that treasury of obscure wisdom which he, perhaps alone of living men, had rifled, could but be thrown open to the sick and suffering, the name of Dr. Fu-Manchu would rank with the golden ones in the history of healing.

Nayland Smith suddenly turned, and the expression upon his face amazed me.

"Look up the next train to L--!" he rapped. "To L--? What--?"

"There's the Bradshaw. We haven't a minute to waste."

In his voice was the imperative note I knew so well; in his eyes was the light which told of an urgent need for action-- a portentous truth suddenly grasped.

"One in half-an-hour--the last."

"We must catch it."

No further word of explanation he vouchsafed, but darted off to dress; for he had spent the afternoon pacing the room in his dressing-gown and smoking without intermission.

Out and to the corner we hurried, and leaped into the first taxi upon the rank. Smith enjoined the man to hasten, and we were off-- all in that whirl of feverish activity which characterized my friend's movements in times of important action.

He sat glancing impatiently from the window and twitching at the lobe of his ear.

"I know you will forgive me, old man," he said, "but there is a little problem which I am trying to work out in my mind. Did you bring the things I mentioned?"

"Yes."

Conversation lapsed, until, just as the cab turned into the station, Smith said: "Should you consider Lord Southery to have been the first constructive engineer of his time, Petrie?"

"Undoubtedly," I replied.

"Greater than Von Homber, of Berlin?"

"Possibly not. But Von Homber has been dead for three years."

"Three years, is it?"

"Roughly."

"Ah!"

We reached the station in time to secure a non-corridor compartment to ourselves, and to allow Smith leisure carefully to inspect the occupants of all the others, from the engine to the guard's van. He was muffled up to the eyes, and he warned me to keep out of sight in the corner of the compartment. In fact, his behavior had me bursting with curiosity. The train having started:

"Don't imagine, Petrie," said Smith "that I am trying to lead you blindfolded in order later to dazzle you with my perspicacity. I am simply afraid that this may be a wild-goose chase. The idea upon which I am acting does not seem to have struck you. I wish it had. The fact would argue in favor of its being, sound."

"At present I am hopelessly mystified."

"Well, then, I will not bias you towards my view. But just study the situation, and see if you can arrive at the reason for this sudden journey. I shall be distinctly encouraged if you succeed."

But I did not succeed, and since Smith obviously was unwilling to enlighten me, I pressed him no more. The train stopped at Rugby, where he was engaged with the stationmaster in making some mysterious arrangements. At L--, however, their object became plain, for a high-power car was awaiting us, and into this we hurried and ere the greater number of passengers had reached the platform were being driven off at headlong speed along the moon-bathed roads.

Twenty minutes' rapid traveling, and a white mansion leaped into the line of sight, standing out vividly against its woody backing.

"Stradwick Hall," said Smith. "The home of Lord Southery. We are first--but Dr. Fu-Manchu was on the train."

Then the truth dawned upon the gloom of my perplexity.