

CHAPTER 25

I WAS being carried along a dimly lighted, tunnel-like place, slung, sackwise, across the shoulder of a Burman. He was not a big man, but he supported my considerable weight with apparent ease. A deadly nausea held me, but the rough handling had served to restore me to consciousness. My hands and feet were closely lashed. I hung limply as a wet towel: I felt that this spark of tortured life which had flickered up in me must ere long finally become extinguished.

A fancy possessed me, in these the first moments of my restoration to the world of realities, that I had been smuggled into China; and as I swung head downward I told myself that the huge, puffy things which strewed the path were a species of giant toadstool, unfamiliar to me and possibly peculiar to whatever district of China I now was in.

The air was hot, steamy, and loaded with a smell as of rotting vegetation. I wondered why my bearer so scrupulously avoided touching any of the unwholesome-looking growths in passing through what seemed a succession of cellars, but steered a tortuous course among the bloated, unnatural shapes, lifting his bare brown feet with a catlike delicacy.

He passed under a low arch, dropped me roughly to the ground and ran back. Half stunned, I lay watching the agile brown body melt into the distances of the cellars. Their walls and roof seemed to emit a faint, phosphorescent light.

"Petrie!" came a weak voice from somewhere ahead.... "Is that you, Petrie?"

It was Nayland Smith!

"Smith!" I said, and strove to sit up. But the intense nausea overcame me, so that I all but swooned.

I heard his voice again, but could attach no meaning to the words which he uttered. A sound of terrific blows reached my ears, too. The Burman reappeared, bending under the heavy load which he bore. For, as he picked his way through the bloated things which grew upon the floors of the cellars, I realized that he was carrying the inert body of Inspector Weymouth. And I found time to compare the strength of the little brown man with that of a Nile beetle, which can raise many times its own weight. Then, behind him, appeared a second figure, which immediately claimed the whole of my errant attention.

"Fu-Manchu!" hissed my friend, from the darkness which concealed him.

It was indeed none other than Fu-Manchu--the Fu-Manchu whom we had thought to be helpless. The depths of the Chinaman's cunning--the fine quality of his courage, were forced upon me as amazing facts.

He had assumed the appearance of a drugged opium-smoker so well as to dupe me--a medical man; so well as to dupe Karamaneh--whose experience of the noxious habit probably was greater than my own. And, with the gallows dangling before him, he had waited--played the part of a lure--whilst a body of police actually surrounded the place!

I have since thought that the room probably was one which he actually used for opium debauches, and the device of the trap was intended to protect him during the comatose period.

Now, holding a lantern above his head, the deviser of the trap whereinto we, mouselike, had blindly entered, came through the cellars, following the brown man who carried Weymouth.

The faint rays of the lantern (it apparently contained a candle) revealed a veritable forest of the gigantic fungi--poisonously colored--hideously swollen--climbing from the floor up the slimy walls--climbing like horrid parasites to such part of the arched roof as was visible to me.

Fu-Manchu picked his way through the fungi ranks as daintily as though the distorted, tumid things had been viper-headed.

The resounding blows which I had noted before, and which had never ceased, culminated in a splintering crash. Dr. Fu-Manchu and his servant, who carried the apparently insensible detective, passed in under the arch, Fu-Manchu glancing back once along the passages. The lantern he extinguished, or concealed; and whilst I waited, my mind dully surveying, memories of all the threats which this uncanny being had uttered, a distant clamor came to my ears.

Then, abruptly, it ceased. Dr. Fu-Manchu had closed a heavy door; and to my surprise I perceived that the greater part of it was of glass. The will-o'-the-wisp glow which played around the fungi rendered the vista of the cellars faintly luminous, and visible to me from where I lay. Fu-Manchu spoke softly. His voice, its guttural note alternating with a sibilance on certain words, betrayed no traces of agitation. The man's unbroken calm had in it something inhuman. For he had just perpetrated an act of daring unparalleled in my experience, and, in the clamor now shut out by the glass door I tardily recognized the entrance of the police into some barricaded part of the house-- the coming of those who would save us--who would hold the Chinese doctor for the hangman!

"I have decided," he said deliberately, "that you are more worthy of my attention than I had formerly supposed. A man who can solve the secret of the Golden Elixir (I had not solved it; I had merely stolen some) should be a valuable acquisition to my Council. The extent of the plans of Mr. Commissioner Nayland Smith and of the English Scotland Yard it is incumbent upon me to learn. Therefore, gentlemen, you live--for the present!"

"And you'll swing," came Weymouth's hoarse voice, "in the near future! You and all your yellow gang!"

"I trust not," was the placid reply. "Most of my people are safe: some are shipped as lascars upon the liners; others have departed by different means. Ah!"

That last word was the only one indicative of excitement which had yet escaped him. A disk of light danced among the brilliant poison hues of the passages--but no sound reached us; by which I knew that the glass door must fit almost hermetically. It was much cooler here than in the place through which we had passed, and the nausea began to leave me, my brain to grow more clear. Had I known what was to follow I should have cursed the lucidity of mind which now came to me; I should have prayed for oblivion-- to be spared the sight of that which ensued.

"It's Logan!" cried Inspector Weymouth; and I could tell that he was struggling to free himself of his bonds. From his voice it was evident that he, too, was recovering from the effects of the narcotic which had been administered to us all.

"Logan!" he cried. "Logan! This way--HELP!"

But the cry beat back upon us in that enclosed space and seemed to carry no farther than the invisible walls of our prison.

"The door fits well," came Fu-Manchu's mocking voice. "It is fortunate for us all that it is so. This is my observation window, Dr. Petrie, and you are about to enjoy an unique opportunity of studying fungology. I have already drawn your attention to the anaesthetic properties of the lycoperdon, or common puff-ball. You may have recognized the fumes? The chamber into

which you rashly precipitated yourselves was charged with them. By a process of my own I have greatly enhanced the value of the puff-ball in this respect. Your friend, Mr. Weymouth, proved the most obstinate subject; but he succumbed in fifteen seconds."

"Logan! Help! HELP! This way, man!"

Something very like fear sounded in Weymouth's voice now. Indeed, the situation was so uncanny that it almost seemed unreal. A group of men had entered the farthest cellars, led by one who bore an electric pocket-lamp. The hard, white ray danced from bloated gray fungi to others of nightmare shape, of dazzling, venomous brilliance. The mocking, lecture-room voice continued:

"Note the snowy growth upon the roof, Doctor. Do not be deceived by its size. It is a giant variety of my own culture and is of the order *empusa*. You, in England, are familiar with the death of the common house-fly-- which is found attached to the window-pane by a coating of white mold. I have developed the spores of this mold and have produced a giant species. Observe the interesting effect of the strong light upon my orange and blue *amanita fungus*!"

Hard beside me I heard Nayland Smith groan, Weymouth had become suddenly silent. For my own part, I could have shrieked in pure horror. FOR I KNEW WHAT WAS COMING. I realized in one agonized instant the significance of the dim lantern, of the careful progress through the subterranean fungi grove, of the care with which Fu-Manchu and his servant had avoided touching any of the growths. I knew, now, that Dr. Fu-Manchu was the greatest fungologist the world had ever known; was a poisoner to whom the Borgias were as children-- and I knew that the detectives blindly were walking into a valley of death.

Then it began--the unnatural scene--the saturnalia of murder.

Like so many bombs the brilliantly colored caps of the huge toadstool-like things alluded to by the Chinaman exploded, as the white ray sought them out in the darkness which alone preserved their existence. A brownish cloud--I could not determine whether liquid or powdery--arose in the cellar. I tried to close my eyes--or to turn them away from the reeling forms of the men who were trapped in that poison-hole. It was useless:

I must look.

The bearer of the lamp had dropped it, but the dim, eerily illuminated gloom endured scarce a second. A bright light sprang up--doubtless at the touch of the fiendish being who now resumed speech:

"Observe the symptoms of delirium, Doctor!" Out there, beyond the glass door, the unhappy victims were laughing-- tearing their garments from their bodies--leaping--waving their arms-- were become MANIACS!

"We will now release the ripe spores of giant *entpusa*," continued the wicked voice. "The air of the second cellar being super-charged with oxygen, they immediately germinate. Ah! it is a triumph! That process is the scientific triumph of my life!"

Like powdered snow the white spores fell from the roof, frosting the writhing shapes of the already poisoned men. Before my horrified gaze, THE FUNGUS GREW; it spread from the head to the feet of those it touched; it enveloped them as in glittering shrouds. . . .

"They die like flies!" screamed Fu-Manchu, with a sudden febrile excitement; and I felt assured of something I had long suspected: that that magnificent, perverted brain was the brain of a homicidal maniac--though Smith would never accept the theory.

"It is my fly-trap!" shrieked the Chinaman. "And I am the god of destruction!"

CHAPTER 26

THE clammy touch of the mist revived me. The culmination of the scene in the poison cellars, together with the effects of the fumes which I had inhaled again, had deprived me of consciousness. Now I knew that I was afloat on the river. I still was bound: furthermore, a cloth was wrapped tightly about my mouth, and I was secured to a ring in the deck.

By moving my aching head to the left I could look down into the oily water; by moving it to the right I could catch a glimpse of the empurpled face of Inspector Weymouth, who, similarly bound and gagged, lay beside me, but only of the feet and legs of Nayland Smith. For I could not turn my head sufficiently far to see more.

We were aboard an electric launch. I heard the hated guttural voice of Fu-Manchu, subdued now to its habitual calm, and my heart leaped to hear the voice that answered him. It was that of Karamaneh. His triumph was complete. Clearly his plans for departure were complete; his slaughter of the police in the underground passages had been a final reckless demonstration of which the Chinaman's subtle cunning would have been incapable had he not known his escape from the country to be assured.

What fate was in store for us? How would he avenge himself upon the girl who had betrayed him to his enemies? What portion awaited those enemies? He seemed to have formed the singular determination to smuggle me into China-- but what did he purpose in the case of Weymouth, and in the case of Nayland Smith?

All but silently we were feeling our way through the mist. Astern died the clangor of dock and wharf into a remote discord. Ahead hung the foggy curtain veiling the traffic of the great waterway; but through it broke the calling of sirens, the tinkling of bells.

The gentle movement of the screw ceased altogether. The launch lay heaving slightly upon the swells.

A distant throbbing grew louder--and something advanced upon us through the haze.

A bell rang and muffled by the fog a voice proclaimed itself-- a voice which I knew. I felt Weymouth writhing impotently beside me; heard him mumbling incoherently; and I knew that he, too, had recognized the voice.

It was that of Inspector Ryman of the river police and their launch was within biscuit-throw of that upon which we lay!

"Hoy! 'Hoy!"

I trembled. A feverish excitement claimed me. They were hailing us. We carried no lights; but now--and ignoring the pain which shot from my spine to my skull I craned my neck to the left--the port light of the police launch glowed angrily through the mist.

I was unable to utter any save mumbling sounds, and my companions were equally helpless. It was a desperate position. Had the police seen us or had they hailed at random? The light drew nearer.

"Launch, 'hoy!"

They had seen us! Fu-Manchu's guttural voice spoke shortly-- and our screw began to revolve again; we leaped ahead into the bank of darkness. Faint grew the light of the police launch--and was gone. But I heard Ryman's voice shouting.

"Full speed!" came faintly through the darkness. "Port! Port!"

Then the murk closed down, and with our friends far astern of us we were racing deeper into the fog banks--speeding seaward; though of this I was unable to judge at the time.

On we raced, and on, sweeping over growing swells. Once, a black, towering shape dropped down upon us. Far above, lights blazed, bells rang, vague cries pierced the fog. The launch pitched and rolled perilously, but weathered the wash of the liner which so nearly had concluded this episode. It was such a journey as I had taken once before, early in our pursuit of the genius of the Yellow Peril; but this was infinitely more terrible; for now we were utterly in Fu-Manchu's power.

A voice mumbled in my ear. I turned my bound-up face; and Inspector Weymouth raised his hands in the dimness and partly slipped the bandage from his mouth.

"I've been working at the cords since we left those filthy cellars," he whispered. "My wrists are all cut, but when I've got out a knife and freed my ankles--"

Smith had kicked him with his bound feet. The detective slipped the bandage back to position and placed his hands behind him again. Dr. Fu-Manchu, wearing a heavy overcoat but no hat, came aft. He was dragging Karamaneh by the wrists. He seated himself on the cushions near to us, pulling the girl down beside him. Now, I could see her face--and the expression in her beautiful eyes made me writhe.

Fu-Manchu was watching us, his discolored teeth faintly visible in the dim light, to which my eyes were becoming accustomed.

"Dr. Petrie," he said, "you shall be my honored guest at my home in China. You shall assist me to revolutionize chemistry. Mr. Smith, I fear you know more of my plans than I had deemed it possible for you to have learned, and I am anxious to know if you have a confidant. Where your memory fails you, and my files and wire jackets prove ineffectual, Inspector Weymouth's recollections may prove more accurate."

He turned to the cowering girl--who shrank away from him in pitiful, abject terror.

"In my hands, Doctor," he continued, "I hold a needle charged with a rare culture. It is the link between the bacilli and the fungi. You have seemed to display an undue interest in the peach and pearl which render my Karamaneh so delightful, In the supple grace of her movements and the sparkle of her eyes. You can never devote your whole mind to those studies which I have planned for you whilst such distractions exist. A touch of this keen point, and the laughing Karamaneh becomes the shrieking hag--the maniacal, mowing--"

Then, with an ox-like rush, Weymouth was upon him!

Karamaneh, wrought upon past endurance, with a sobbing cry, sank to the deck-- and lay still. I managed to writhe into a half-sitting posture, and Smith rolled aside as the detective and the Chinaman crashed down together.

Weymouth had one big hand at the Doctor's yellow throat; with his left he grasped the Chinaman's right. It held the needle.

Now, I could look along, the length of the little craft, and, so far as it was possible to make out in the fog, only one other was aboard-- the half-clad brown man who navigated her-- and who had carried us through the cellars. The murk had grown denser and now shut us in like a box. The throb of the motor--the hissing breath of the two who fought-- with so much at issue--these sounds and the wash of the water alone broke the eerie stillness.

By slow degrees, and with a reptilian agility horrible to watch, Fu-Manchu was neutralizing the advantage gained by Weymouth. His clawish fingers were fast in the big man's throat; the right hand with its deadly needle was forcing down the left of his opponent. He had been underneath, but now he was gaining the upper place. His powers of physical endurance must have been truly marvelous. His breath was whistling through his nostrils significantly, but Weymouth was palpably tiring.

The latter suddenly changed his tactics. By a supreme effort, to which he was spurred, I think, by the growing proximity of the needle, he raised Fu-Manchu--by the throat and arm-- and pitched him sideways.

The Chinaman's grip did not relax, and the two wrestlers dropped, a writhing mass, upon the port cushions. The launch heeled over, and my cry of horror was crushed back into my throat by the bandage. For, as Fu-Manchu sought to extricate himself, he overbalanced-- fell back--and, bearing Weymouth with him--slid into the river!

The mist swallowed them up.

There are moments of which no man can recall his mental impressions, moments so acutely horrible that, mercifully, our memory retains nothing of the emotions they occasioned. This was one of them. A chaos ruled in my mind. I had a vague belief that the Burman, forward, glanced back. Then the course of the launch was changed. How long intervened between the tragic end of that Gargantuan struggle and the time when a black wall leaped suddenly up before us I cannot pretend to state.

With a sickening jerk we ran aground. A loud explosion ensued, and I clearly remember seeing the brown man leap out into the fog-- which was the last I saw of him.

Water began to wash aboard.

Fully alive to our imminent peril, I fought with the cords that bound me; but I lacked poor Weymouth's strength of wrist, and I began to accept as a horrible and imminent possibility, a death from drowning, within six feet of the bank.

Beside me, Nayland Smith was straining and twisting. I think his object was to touch Karamaneh, in the hope of arousing her. Where he failed in his project, the inflowing water succeeded. A silent prayer of thankfulness came from my very soul when I saw her stir--when I saw her raise her hands to her head-- and saw the big, horror-bright eyes gleam through the mist veil.