

CHAPTER 29

DUSK was falling when we made our way in the direction of Maple Cottage. Nayland Smith appeared to be keenly interested in the character of the district. A high and ancient wall bordered the road along which we walked for a considerable distance. Later it gave place to a rickety fence.

My friend peered through a gap in the latter.

"There is quite an extensive estate here," he said, "not yet cut up by the builder. It is well wooded on one side, and there appears to be a pool lower down."

The road was a quiet one, and we plainly heard the tread-- quite unmistakable--of an approaching policeman. Smith continued to peer through the hole in the fence, until the officer drew up level with us. Then:

"Does this piece of ground extend down to the village, constable?" he inquired.

Quite willing for a chat, the man stopped, and stood with his thumbs thrust in his belt.

"Yes, sir. They tell me three new roads will be made through it between here and the hill."

"It must be a happy hunting ground for tramps?"

"I've seen some suspicious-looking coves about at times. But after dusk an army might be inside there and nobody would ever be the wiser."

"Burglaries frequent in the houses backing on to it?"

"Oh, no. A favorite game in these parts is snatching loaves and bottles of milk from the doors, first thing, as they're delivered. There's been an extra lot of it lately. My mate who relieves me has got special instructions to keep his eye open in the mornings!" The man grinned. "It wouldn't be a very big case even if he caught anybody!" "No," said Smith absently; "perhaps not. Your business must be a dry one this warm weather. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir," replied the constable, richer by half-a-crown--"and thank you."

Smith stared after him for a moment, tugging reflectively at the lobe of his ear.

"I don't know that it wouldn't be a big case, after all," he murmured. "Come on, Petrie."

Not another word did he speak, until we stood at the gate of Maple Cottage. There a plain-clothes man was standing, evidently awaiting Smith. He touched his hat.

"Have you found a suitable hiding-place?" asked my companion rapidly.

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "Kent--my mate--is there now. You'll notice that he can't be seen from here."

"No," agreed Smith, peering all about him. "He can't. Where is he?"

"Behind the broken wall," explained the man, pointing. "Through that ivy there's a clear view of the cottage door."

"Good. Keep your eyes open. If a messenger comes for me, he is to be intercepted, you understand. No one must be allowed to disturb us. You will recognize the messenger. He will be one of your fellows. Should he come--hoot three times, as much like an owl as you can."

We walked up to the porch of the cottage. In response to Smith's ringing came James Weymouth, who seemed greatly relieved by our arrival.

"First," said my friend briskly, "you had better run up and see the patient."

Accordingly, I followed Weymouth upstairs and was admitted by his wife to a neat little bedroom where the grief-stricken woman lay, a wanly pathetic sight.

"Did you administer the draught, as directed?" I asked.

Mrs. James Weymouth nodded. She was a kindly looking woman, with the same dread haunting her hazel eyes as that which lurked in her husband's blue ones.

The patient was sleeping soundly. Some whispered instructions I gave to the faithful nurse and descended to the sitting-room. It was a warm night, and Weymouth sat by the open window, smoking. The dim light from the lamp on the table lent him an almost startling likeness to his brother; and for a moment I stood at the foot of the stairs scarce able to trust my reason. Then he turned his face fully towards me, and the illusion was lost.

"Do you think she is likely to wake, Doctor?" he asked.

"I think not," I replied.

Nayland Smith stood upon the rug before the hearth, swinging from one foot to the other, in his nervously restless way. The room was foggy with the fumes of tobacco, for he, too, was smoking.

At intervals of some five to ten minutes, his blackened briar (which I never knew him to clean or scrape) would go out. I think Smith used more matches than any other smoker I have ever met, and he invariably carried three boxes in various pockets of his garments.

The tobacco habit is infectious, and, seating myself in an arm-chair, I lighted a cigarette. For this dreary vigil I had come prepared with a bunch of rough notes, a writing-block, and a fountain pen. I settled down to work upon my record of the Fu-Manchu case.

Silence fell upon Maple Cottage. Save for the shuddering sigh which whispered through the over-hanging cedars and Smith's eternal match-striking, nothing was there to disturb me in my task. Yet I could make little progress. Between my mind and the chapter upon which I was at work a certain sentence persistently intruded itself. It was as though an unseen hand held the written page closely before my eyes. This was the sentence:

"Imagine a person, tall, lean, and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green: invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect. . ."

Dr. Fu-Manchu! Fu-Manchu as Smith had described him to me on that night which now seemed so remotely distant--the night upon which I had learned of the existence of the wonderful and evil being born of that secret quickening which stirred in the womb of the yellow races.

As Smith, for the ninth or tenth time, knocked out his pipe on a bar of the grate, the cuckoo clock in the kitchen proclaimed the hour.

"Two," said James Weymouth.

I abandoned my task, replacing notes and writing-block in the bag that I had with me. Weymouth adjusted the lamp which had begun to smoke.

I tiptoed to the stairs and, stepping softly, ascended to the sick room. All was quiet, and Mrs. Weymouth whispered to me that the patient still slept soundly. I returned to find Nayland Smith pacing about the room in that state of suppressed excitement habitual with him in the approach of any crisis. At a quarter past two the breeze dropped entirely, and such a stillness reigned all about us as I could not have supposed possible so near to the ever-throbbing heart of the great metropolis. Plainly I could hear Weymouth's heavy breathing. He sat at the window

and looked out into the black shadows under the cedars. Smith ceased his pacing and stood again on the rug very still. He was listening! I doubt not we were all listening.

Some faint sound broke the impressive stillness, coming from the direction of the village street. It was a vague, indefinite disturbance, brief, and upon it ensued a silence more marked than ever. Some minutes before, Smith had extinguished the lamp. In the darkness I heard his teeth snap sharply together.

The call of an owl sounded very clearly three times.

I knew that to mean that a messenger had come; but from whence or bearing what tidings I knew not. My friend's plans were incomprehensible to me, nor had I pressed him for any explanation of their nature, knowing him to be in that high-strung and somewhat irritable mood which claimed him at times of uncertainty--when he doubted the wisdom of his actions, the accuracy of his surmises. He gave no sign.

Very faintly I heard a clock strike the half-hour. A soft breeze stole again through the branches above. The wind I thought must be in a new quarter since I had not heard the clock before. In so lonely a spot it was difficult to believe that the bell was that of St. Paul's. Yet such was the fact.

And hard upon the ringing followed another sound--a sound we all had expected, had waited for; but at whose coming no one of us, I think, retained complete mastery of himself.

Breaking up the silence in a manner that set my heart wildly leaping it came-- an imperative knocking on the door!

"My God!" groaned Weymouth--but he did not move from his position at the window.

"Stand by, Petrie!" said Smith.

He strode to the door--and threw it widely open.

I know I was very pale. I think I cried out as I fell back-- retreated with clenched hands from before THAT which stood on the threshold.

It was a wild, unkempt figure, with straggling beard, hideously staring eyes. With its hands it clutched at its hair--at its chin; plucked at its mouth. No moonlight touched the features of this unearthly visitant, but scanty as was the illumination we could see the gleaming teeth-- and the wildly glaring eyes.

It began to laugh--peal after peal--hideous and shrill.

Nothing so terrifying had ever smote upon my ears. I was palsied by the horror of the sound.

Then Nayland Smith pressed the button of an electric torch which he carried. He directed the disk of white light fully upon the face in the doorway.

"Oh, God!" cried Weymouth. "It's John!"--and again and again: "Oh, God! Oh, God!"

Perhaps for the first time in my life I really believed (nay, I could not doubt) that a thing of another world stood before me. I am ashamed to confess the extent of the horror that came upon me. James Weymouth raised his hands, as if to thrust away from him that awful thing in the door. He was babbling--prayers, I think, but wholly incoherent.

"Hold him, Petrie!"

Smith's voice was low. (When we were past thought or intelligent action, he, dominant and cool, with that forced calm for which, a crisis over, he always paid so dearly, was thinking of the woman who slept above.)

He leaped forward; and in the instant that he grappled with the one who had knocked I knew the visitant for a man of flesh and blood--a man who shrieked and fought like a savage animal, foamed at the mouth and gnashed his teeth in horrid frenzy; knew him for a madman--knew him for the victim of Fu-Manchu-- not dead, but living--for Inspector Weymouth--a maniac!

In a flash I realized all this and sprang to Smith's assistance. There was a sound of racing footsteps and the men who had been watching outside came running into the porch. A third was with them; and the five of us (for Weymouth's brother had not yet grasped the fact that a man and not a spirit shrieked and howled in our midst) clung to the infuriated madman, yet barely held our own with him.

"The syringe, Petrie!" gasped Smith. "Quick! You must manage to make an injection!"

I extricated myself and raced into the cottage for my bag. A hypodermic syringe ready charged I had brought with me at Smith's request. Even in that thrilling moment I could find time to admire the wonderful foresight of my friend, who had divined what would befall--isolated the strange, pitiful truth from the chaotic circumstances which saw us at Maple Cottage that night.

Let me not enlarge upon the end of the awful struggle. At one time I despaired (we all despaired) of quieting the poor, demented creature. But at last it was done; and the gaunt, blood-stained savage whom we had known as Detective-Inspector Weymouth lay passive upon the couch in his own sitting-room. A great wonder possessed my mind for the genius of the uncanny being who with the scratch of a needle had made a brave and kindly man into this unclean, brutish thing.

Nayland Smith, gaunt and wild-eyed, and trembling yet with his tremendous exertions, turned to the man whom I knew to be the messenger from Scotland Yard.

"Well?" he rapped.

"He is arrested, sir," the detective reported. "They have kept him at his chambers as you ordered."

"Has she slept through it?" said Smith to me. (I had just returned from a visit to the room above.) I nodded.

"Is HE safe for an hour or two?"--indicating the figure on the couch. "For eight or ten," I replied grimly.

"Come, then. Our night's labors are not nearly complete."

CHAPTER 30

LATER was forthcoming evidence to show that poor Weymouth had lived a wild life, in hiding among the thick bushes of the tract of land which lay between the village and the suburb on the neighboring hill. Literally, he had returned to primitive savagery and some of his food had been that of the lower animals, though he had not scrupled to steal, as we learned when his lair was discovered.

He had hidden himself cunningly; but witnesses appeared who had seen him, in the dusk, and fled from him. They never learned that the object of their fear was Inspector John Weymouth. How, having escaped death in the Thames, he had crossed London unobserved, we never knew; but his trick of knocking upon his own door at half-past two each morning (a sort of dawning of sanity mysteriously linked with old custom) will be a familiar class of symptom to all students of alienation.

I revert to the night when Smith solved the mystery of the knocking.

In a car which he had in waiting at the end of the village we sped through the deserted streets to New Inn Court. I, who had followed Nayland Smith through the failures and successes of his mission, knew that to-night he had surpassed himself; had justified the confidence placed in him by the highest authorities.

We were admitted to an untidy room--that of a student, a traveler and a crank--by a plain-clothes officer. Amid picturesque and disordered fragments of a hundred ages, in a great carven chair placed before a towering statue of the Buddha, sat a hand-cuffed man. His white hair and beard were patriarchal; his pose had great dignity. But his expression was entirely masked by the smoked glasses which he wore.

Two other detectives were guarding the prisoner.

"We arrested Professor Jenner Monde as he came in, sir," reported the man who had opened the door. "He has made no statement. I hope there isn't a mistake."

"I hope not," rapped Smith.

He strode across the room. He was consumed by a fever of excitement. Almost savagely, he tore away the beard, tore off the snowy wig dashed the smoked glasses upon the floor.

A great, high brow was revealed, and green, malignant eyes, which fixed themselves upon him with an expression I never can forget.

IT WAS Dr. FU-MANCHU!

One intense moment of silence ensued--of silence which seemed to throb. Then:

"What have you done with Professor Monde?" demanded Smith.

Dr. Fu-Manchu showed his even, yellow teeth in the singularly evil smile which I knew so well. A manacled prisoner he sat as unruffled as a judge upon the bench. In truth and in justice I am compelled to say that Fu-Manchu was absolutely fearless.

"He has been detained in China," he replied, in smooth, sibilant tones--"by affairs of great urgency. His well-known personality and ungregarious habits have served me well, here!"

Smith, I could see, was undetermined how to act; he stood tugging at his ear and glancing from the impassive Chinaman to the wondering detectives.

"What are we to do, sir?" one of them asked.

"Leave Dr. Petrie and myself alone with the prisoner, until I call you."

The three withdrew. I divined now what was coming.

"Can you restore Weymouth's sanity?" rapped Smith abruptly. "I cannot save you from the hangman, nor"--his fists clenched convulsively--"would I if I could; but--"

Fu-Manchu fixed his brilliant eyes upon him.

"Say no more, Mr. Smith," he interrupted; "you misunderstand me. I do not quarrel with that, but what I have done from conviction and what I have done of necessity are separated--are seas apart. The brave Inspector Weymouth I wounded with a poisoned needle, in self-defense; but I regret his condition as greatly as you do. I respect such a man. There is an antidote to the poison of the needle."

"Name it," said Smith.

Fu-Manchu smiled again.

"Useless," he replied. "I alone can prepare it. My secrets shall die with me. I will make a sane man of Inspector Weymouth, but no one else shall be in the house but he and I."

"It will be surrounded by police," interrupted Smith grimly.

"As you please," said Fu-Manchu. "Make your arrangements. In that ebony case upon the table are the instruments for the cure. Arrange for me to visit him where and when you will--"

"I distrust you utterly. It is some trick," jerked Smith.

Dr. Fu-Manchu rose slowly and drew himself up to his great height. His manacled hands could not rob him of the uncanny dignity which was his. He raised them above his head with a tragic gesture and fixed his piercing gaze upon Nayland Smith.

"The God of Cathay hear me," he said, with a deep, guttural note in his voice--"I swear--"

The most awful visitor who ever threatened the peace of England, the end of the visit of Fu-Manchu was characteristic--terrible--inexplicable.

Strange to relate, I did not doubt that this weird being had conceived some kind of admiration or respect for the man to whom he had wrought so terrible an injury. He was capable of such sentiments, for he entertained some similar one in regard to myself.

A cottage farther down the village street than Weymouth's was vacant, and in the early dawn of that morning became the scene of outre happenings. Poor Weymouth, still in a comatose condition, we removed there (Smith having secured the key from the astonished agent). I suppose so strange a specialist never visited a patient before--certainly not under such conditions.

For into the cottage, which had been entirely surrounded by a ring of police, Dr. Fu-Manchu was admitted from the closed car in which, his work of healing complete, he was to be borne to prison--to death!

Law and justice were suspended by my royally empowered friend that the enemy of the white race might heal one of those who had hunted him down!

No curious audience was present, for sunrise was not yet come; no concourse of excited students followed the hand of the Master; but within that surrounded cottage was performed one of those miracles of science which in other circumstances had made the fame of Dr. Fu-Manchu to live forever.

Inspector Weymouth, dazed, disheveled, clutching his head as a man who has passed through the Valley of the Shadow-- but sane--sane!--walked out into the porch!

He looked towards us--his eyes wild, but not with the fearsome wildness of insanity.

"Mr. Smith!" he cried--and staggered down the path--"Dr. Petrie! What--"

There came a deafening explosion. From EVERY visible window of the deserted cottage flames burst forth!

"QUICK!" Smith's voice rose almost to a scream--"into the house!"

He raced up the path, past Inspector Weymouth, who stood swaying there like a drunken man. I was close upon his heels. Behind me came the police.

The door was impassable! Already, it vomited a deathly heat, borne upon stifling fumes like those of the mouth of the Pit. We burst a window. The room within was a furnace!

"My God!" cried someone. "This is supernatural!"

"Listen!" cried another. "Listen!"

The crowd which a fire can conjure up at any hour of day or night, out of the void of nowhere, was gathering already. But upon all descended a pall of silence.

From the heat of the holocaust a voice proclaimed itself--a voice raised, not in anguish but in TRIUMPH! It chanted barbarically--and was still.

The abnormal flames rose higher--leaping forth from every window.

"The alarm!" said Smith hoarsely. "Call up the brigade!"

I come to the close of my chronicle, and feel that I betray a trust--the trust of my reader. For having limned in the colors at my command the fiendish Chinese doctor, I am unable to conclude my task as I should desire, unable, with any consciousness of finality, to write Finis to the end of my narrative.

It seems to me sometimes that my pen is but temporarily idle--that I have but dealt with a single phase of a movement having a hundred phases. One sequel I hope for, and against all the promptings of logic and Western bias. If my hope shall be realized I cannot, at this time, pretend to state.

The future, 'mid its many secrets, holds this precious one from me.

I ask you then, to absolve me from the charge of ill completing my work; for any curiosity with which this narrative may leave the reader burdened is shared by the writer.

With intent, I have rushed you from the chambers of Professor Jenner Monde to that closing episode at the deserted cottage; I have made the pace hot in order to impart to these last pages of my account something of the breathless scurry which characterized those happenings.

My canvas may seem sketchy: it is my impression of the reality. No hard details remain in my mind of the dealings of that night. Fu-Manchu arrested--Fu-Manchu, manacled, entering the cottage on his mission of healing; Weymouth, miraculously rendered sane, coming forth; the place in flames.

And then?

To a shell the cottage burned, with an incredible rapidity which pointed to some hidden agency; to a shell about ashes which held NO TRACE OF HUMAN BONES!

It has been asked of me: Was there no possibility of Fu-Manchu's having eluded us in the ensuing confusion? Was there no loophole of escape?

I reply, that so far as I was able to judge, a rat could scarce have quitted the building undetected. Yet that Fu-Manchu had, in some incomprehensible manner and by some mysterious agency, produced those abnormal flames, I cannot doubt. Did he voluntarily ignite his own funeral pyre?

As I write, there lies before me a soiled and creased sheet of vellum. It bears some lines traced in a cramped, peculiar, and all but illegible hand. This fragment was found by Inspector Weymouth (to this day a man mentally sound) in a pocket of his ragged garments.

When it was written I leave you to judge. How it came to be where Weymouth found it calls for no explanation:

"To Mr. Commissioner NAYLAND SMITH and Dr. PETRIE--

Greeting! I am recalled home by One who may not be denied. In much that I came to do I have failed. Much that I have done I would undo; some little I have undone. Out of fire I came-- the smoldering fire of a thing one day to be a consuming flame; in fire I go. Seek not my ashes. I am the lord of the fires! Farewell.

FU-MANCHU."

Who has been with me in my several meetings with the man who penned that message I leave to adjudge if it be the letter of a madman bent upon self-destruction by strange means, or the gibe of a preternaturally clever scientist and the most elusive being ever born of the land of mystery--China.

For the present, I can aid you no more in the forming of your verdict. A day may come though I pray it do not--when I shall be able to throw new light upon much that is dark in this matter. That day, so far as I can judge, could only dawn in the event of the Chinaman's survival; therefore I pray that the veil be never lifted.

But, as I have said, there is another sequel to this story which I can contemplate with a different countenance. How, then, shall I conclude this very unsatisfactory account?

Shall I tell you, finally, of my parting with lovely, dark-eyed Karamaneh, on board the liner which was to bear her to Egypt?

No, let me, instead, conclude with the words of Nayland Smith:

"I sail for Burma in a fortnight, Petrie. I have leave to break my journey at the Ditch. How would a run up the Nile fit your programme? Bit early for the season, but you might find something to amuse you!"