

THE TINKLE OF THE CAMEL'S BELL

(1928)

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Li Kan was a very rich man, yet he kept a small hotel in Hankow and had the simplest of tastes. Nothing aroused his anger. Nothing aroused his enthusiasm. He viewed life in a very impersonal manner. It interested him. All sorts and conditions of people came to his house, poor and rich alike, wanderers who anchored like ships for a moment at his wharf and then drifted on.

Whence did they come? Whither were they going? These were the questions Li Kan liked to ponder as he smoked a long bamboo pipe of vile tobacco. For hours he would sit in a corner of his tea room engrossed in his own meditations. He seemed to live in a perpetual dream.

One night as he slept he heard the tinkle of a camel's bell, a camel that was doubtless part of a caravan headed for the North, a caravan trading in adventure.

"Why should I not journey abroad?" he mused. "I am rich. Perhaps I would have adventures as boundless as the sea."

The tinkle of the camel's bell continued. It was a lure beckoning him onward into unknown lands. Throughout the night he lay sleepless, his brain bursting with plans and ambitions. He would set out on a mission of drollery, to see life, to be amused, and if possible, to bestow a bit of philosophy upon those who chanced to come within the radius of his charm.

He left his hotel on a certain day when the air was fragrant with the aroma of spices, a day when caravans were passing laden with silks and perfumes and fine porcelains. It seemed to him to forebode a mysteriously pleasant journey. All that he carried with him was bound up in a small rug. About his person was disposed a generous sum of money. But the costume he wore was the costume of a poor man. It was of blue silk, but faded and slightly frayed with age.

Li Kan breathed deeply of the air in which ten thousand eery odors blended.

The first night of his pilgrimage found him far off in the mountain fastnesses where habitations were few. He had not provided himself with charts or maps because he imagined such a procedure would sap much of the glamor from his enterprise. Thus it was that the night shadows creeping down like serpents from the bleak mountains found him rather at a loss for a roof. Night at best is a dismal thing, suggesting sleep, which is a period of insensibility wherein a man's soul escapes to realms the location of which no human writer has ever been able to explain.

And it so happened that in his dilemma Li Kan chanced upon a filthy hostelry that was so vile it was nauseous. Li Kan was one of the few Chinamen who appreciated the gift of cleanliness. Nevertheless, he preferred the hovel to the wind-swept mountain passes.

The keeper of the inn was Ts Ah-nyi, once a famous outlaw who had quit the main roads of travel because there was a price upon his head sufficiently large to make his death a thing to be desired. He was a short, squat, expressionless yellow-man, greasy and unkempt, who exhaled a loathsome odor that was stifling. He eyed Li Kan shrewdly, suspiciously, but he did not deny him a place wherein to sleep.

Until late into the night the two sat together drinking samshu and talking garrulously. After awhile Ts Ah-nyi commenced to grow intoxicated, not excessively so but sufficiently for

him to become confidential. From a concealed pocket in his sleeve he drew a huge opal. It shimmered and gleamed in the feeble lantern-light like a tiny ball of fire.

"Have you ever seen anything like it?" he demanded in a guttural voice.

Li Kan yawned. From his own pocket he drew a mighty emerald. It was as green as field-grass in mid-summer.

"Naught but this," he replied. In all the world no other such emerald exists. It makes a pauper of me, so great is its power, because I am afraid to appear affluent else I might be robbed of it. I remain in poverty to protect this perfect jewel."

At sunrise Li Kan continued onward down the road, of the length of which he had no knowledge. To where it led, or for what purpose were enigmas. Toward noon he stopped by the wayside to eat a few nuts and to nibble a bit of cold turnip. And as he rested he reached into his pocket for the emerald. It was gone. He yawned slightly. After all, perhaps it was as well that his tale of its marvelous worth had been a fabrication. By lantern-light the green glass certainly resembled a fine jewel. Again he yawned. From the rug in which his rarest treasures were hidden he drew an opal, the gorgeous opal which Ts Ah-nyi had gloated over. In this vast world of deceit and treachery that at least was true, was real. In the sunlight it flashed more dazzlingly than by dim lantern-light.

Li Kan rose to his feet. As he pushed onward he mused, "I wonder if one can be called a robber simply because one robs a robber."

He finished eating his almonds and the cold turnip. The almonds were very good, the turnip was very good, life was very good.

Many and interesting were the adventures which Li Kan experienced during the next few weeks. Drolleries galore passed before his comprehension. He laughed much, though there were times when he was greatly saddened by the poverty of the dwellers in the bleak, desolate country through which he was passing. Only a universalist can have any perspective, can appreciate his own comparative lack of importance as compared with the immensity of existing things.

One day on the fringe of a strange city he chanced upon an open gate leading to a great garden. There was no one about. The place seemed deserted. He realized that he was trespassing, but he ventured in. The white walks were deserted. In among the oaks and willows he wandered, past gorgeous flower-beds of wisteria and peonies. The scent of peach blossoms was in the air. But there was no one about. The garden was beautifully cultivated but deserted.

As he walked deeper into the garden he approached a long, low, rambling house with a red roof. At the corners were fantastic designs and carved figures. The entrance-door was open. He stood before it, not knowing how to proceed. But the strange house beckoned, so he entered. What a profusion of beauty and charm greeted his eyes! The sudden change from bright sunshine to the soft-lighted rooms dimmed his vision for a moment, but as it cleared he gasped at the wondrous tapestries, the silken hangings, the gorgeous rugs of velvet softness, the marvelously carved vases and urns. Never, he thought, had such a display of splendor been spread out before him. On the air floated a suggestion of musk and old roses, perfume of magic that struck him like a drug until his senses reeled. Through room after room he passed, each more beautiful than the last, all hung in riotous colors reflecting from the silk draperies. But nowhere was there a sound. Not a footfall disturbed the tranquillity. Still here and there were lanterns burning, so the place could not have been long deserted.

At last he came to a room larger than all others. It was of immense length and completely draped in what appeared to be soft, dark carpet and a thronelike structure at the far end. Above it

hung a cluster of soft-toned orange lanterns. Upon the throne a lovely woman was seated. She, too, was dressed all in black, black that blended into the draperies until it appeared as though she had no body, just a white face and hands heavily bejeweled.

Li Kan gasped as he gazed upon her. She seemed very young and yet there was a suggestion of age about her. Her pungent lips were as fragrant as honey. Her eyes were somber, dreamful and dark as the velvet draperies. They glistened like black opals in the mellow orange light. Her hair was smooth and clung close to her checks. Even with the severity of its arrangement she was marvelously beautiful. Behind one ear she wore a small orange chrysanthemum.

At Li Kan's approach She rose to her feet.

"Welcome," she said in a voice that was like hushed music. "It is lonely in this great house and I am indeed gratified when chance passersby are able to tarry here awhile. Life is a great wide road. To attain complete harmony and peace one should pause at intervals by the wayside. Come, talk with me. I have almost lost the power of speech, so long it is since I have been honored by conversing with a stranger."

As she spoke she led the way into one of the other rooms, a room far less severe than that room of clinging blackness. Here were charm and beauty. The hanging draperies were tapestries depicting flower gardens and children romping about in front of colorful temples. There were numerous teakwood chairs inlaid with ebony and mother-of-pearl disposed about the room in charming negligence. Tables bearing lighted lamps, lamps of blended restful intensity, added to the attraction. On the air floated an exotic perfume that made Li Kan drowsy as he inhaled it.

In the lighted room he had opportunity to survey more fully his companion. She was tall and slender. She glided about with snakelike ease, softly, serenely, soundlessly. The severity of her black costume was startling. It emphasized the ivory whiteness of her face and the vivid red splash of her lips. Li Kan selected a chair beside a table.

She waved a listless hand. "Drink," said she, "and forget."

On the table beside him was a jug and several cups. He poured the gay amber liquor into the vessels. It looked like liquid gold. Then proffering one to her he raised the other to his lips. The taste of that liquid was peculiar to an extreme. It caused his entire body to glow. It fired his blood. It made him forget. The past faded off into fog. Again he drank and nothing remained in his memory but the grace and charm of his lovely hostess. She sat opposite him singing softly to herself. The songs she sang were softly plaintive. For some unaccountable reason Li Kan shuddered. He was supremely contented. His will had been subjected to hers. She swayed him utterly. Poor Li Kan! At one sweep his soul had been captured by the Unknown.

"Drink," she whispered, softly, pausing in her singing.

Li Kan drank as directed. It was pleasant to permit her to think for him.

Never in his life, he mused, had he beheld a woman so superbly beautiful as this strange singer who sat so calmly before him. Her white face fairly glowed. Her beauty was dazzling. Suddenly an intense desire overcame him to bestow some treasure upon her. At once he bethought himself of the wondrous opal which he had stolen from Ts Ah-nyi. He fumbled about in his garments until he located it. It gleamed like a bit of glowing metal as he held it out to her. She ejaculated a strange little cry as she put out her hand to seize it. It glowed gloriously until her hand closed upon it. Then instantly an odd change came over it. It ceased to glitter. The fire went out. It grew cold. She shuddered as she released it from her grasp. It fell to the floor, a cold, dead thing. Li Kan gazed at it fascinated. What had happened to this perfect stone? What was there in the touch of this lovely woman that deadened the fire in the opal?

Meanwhile the woman seemed slightly ill at ease. For the first time her wondrous poise forsook her. She seemed agitated, although at the same time she seemed more beautiful than ever. She walked nervously to where a vase of chrysanthemums stood upon a table. They were gorgeous yellow in the pungent light. Softly she drew one from the vase and pressed it to her lips. It withered at once and fell to the floor like a flower that had been parched and burned by the sun. Li Kan turned his head. He pretended that he had not witnessed the strange sight. The woman returned to her seat beside the table. She signed softly but she did not sing again.

That night Li Kan slept in a lavish chamber at the far end of the house. There were cushions and coverlets in profusion to comfort his rest. But he could not sleep. Fear gripped his heart. It made of him a pitiful thing, a shaking, cringing, fawning thing that jumped at every shadow.

After he turned out the lamps, which had added a bit of cheer to the room, it was as though reality vanished utterly. He was in a strange region of legends and odd beliefs. The blackness bore down upon him with frightful weight. It seemed to have texture like the black velvet draperies in the throneroom. And in the blackness he imagined he could dimly make out wraiths, forms, odd figments of his distorted imagination. Utter silence reigned. Its pitch was deafening, almost bursting his eardrums. It seemed as if numerous voices were whispering. Far in the distance they were forever whispering. Sighing and whispering. Moaning and whispering. Sobbing and whispering. The pressure of the blackness increased. He was suffocating, buried alive, engulfed in a jet pit of fear.

Yet naught had he beheld at the great house but beauty. The woman was more glorious than sunrise over the yellow sea, than moonlight on a pink coral beach, than fronds of palm trees, silhouetted against a deep blue starlit sky. The furnishings of the house were of immense worth. The, tapestries were masterpieces, The vases were as wondrous as any ever turned out by the greatest ceramic artists of King-teh-chen. The floor coverings were as soft and rich as fine grass. Nothing had been singular except that the light of the opal had died when the lady had touched it. And a flower had withered that she had lifted to her soft red lips. Truly this was little whereof to weave such stark horror. Yet horror had taken root in his mind. He could not banish it. It was as unescapable as the pressing blackness that bore down upon his chest.

With great effort he rose from his couch and strode over to the tiny aperture that served as a window. It was no wider than the palm of his hand. Not even a dog could have pressed his way through it. He gazed beyond it eagerly. A bit of the moon was visible, and one bright star. Constantly they disappeared as scurrying clouds drifted by. Then the clouds thickened and the star vanished utterly, leaving the darkness more pronounced than ever.

In a frenzy of fear Li Kan relighted the lamps.

The room once more assumed an air of naturalness. The varicolored silk cushions, the rich coverlets, the carved teakwood pedestals on which rare porcelains stood, all served to draw him back to a state of repose. But the horror of his thoughts continued, the presentiment of impending calamity. For the rest of the night he slept not nor did he permit the lamps to expire.

The ensuing days passed like a weird fantasmagoria. Li Kan wished to leave that gorgeous house but he could not. Whenever he attempted to steal out into the sunlit garden he found the doors barred. It is a peculiar fact that he never told the lovely lady of his desire to leave. He believed that to do so would have been futile; more, it would have been highly dangerous. There was a menace constantly hanging over him. He felt it in every fiber of his

body. It was as though a keen two-edged sword hung suspended above him by a thread. The trembling of a flower might cause it to fall.

As time wore on there were moments when he was madly in love with the beautiful lady. These were the periods when he had drunk much of the amber liquor and his blood was a surging fire. The liquor created a tumult within him. He longed to take her into his arms, to press his lips to hers, to take the present and let the future go. Then remembrance of the opal that had lost its fire and the chrysanthemum that had been withered by the touch of her lips assailed him. What would happen to him if he took her into his arms? He was careful in all their moments together never to even touch her hand. He avoided her as though she had been a cauldron of molten metal. His temples were bursting, his eyeballs bulging from their sockets. In the end he succeeded in beating off the fingers that were striving so indefatigably to destroy him. So far his own will was stronger than that of the mind beyond those bony fingers. What would happen when weakness overcame him, he dreaded to think.

But now all these things were forgotten as Li Kan passed his hands reverently over the volumes. Presently he drew from its place one that was yellow with age. The dust was thick upon it. He turned to the title page and read:

Some Account of the Sweet Lady Chin Chu
Who bartered her Soul for Immortality.
She gave her Life to escape Death.
Eons and Eons shall she live
Though without possessing any Life of her own.
All Life shall be drawn from everything she touches.
But of her own Life there shall be none.
She shall live endlessly until some Mortal
Discovers her Secret.

Li Kan was interrupted in his musings by a frightful shriek. The room was plunged into utter darkness. The shrieks continued. The intensity was frightful. Li Kan could feel bony fingers crawling over his face. His own hands shot up spasmodically, caught the crawling fingers and held. Then mercilessly, pitilessly he bent them back, bent them back until the cold, bare bones cracked. The shrieks were diabolical but his ears were deadened. Then came a flash, a flash as vivid as though the very sun had burst. The thread that held the two-edged sword snapped. It fell down upon him, carrying him down, down, down into an endless pit of unconsciousness.

When he again opened his eyes he was lying, a crushed figure, by the side of the road, the road upon which he had been journeying when he turned off to enter the garden.

He looked about him. There was no sign of house, of garden, of habitation anywhere in sight. What had happened? He neither knew nor cared. His body felt as though it had been crushed, broken. His pain was great but he heeded it not. He was free once more, back upon the road, back into the sunlight, back into the clear, crisp air of the mountains. Far in the distance he could hear the tinkle of a camel's bell. It was the bell of the leader of a camel train winding slowly back toward Hankow. It was going home. In that moment a great longing for his little hotel took root in the mind of Li Kan. Henceforth his traveling would be done in his own tea room. He would travel by listening to the adventures of other people.

He rose to his feet. His bones ached but he was able to walk. He shuddered as he thought what might have become of him if he had kissed the soft red lips of Chin Chu. It was a foolish thought, but he almost regretted that he had not risked all for that one sublime moment of rhapsody.

During the ensuing years Li Kan sat in his hotel. Over and over again he told and retold of his adventures. Many believed and went on their way marveling. Others scoffed. They could not understand what had happened to the magnificent house, the lovely lady and the garden. Many shook their heads. They refused to believe. They credited the strange story to the vapors of samshu or opium. But Li Kan smiled. He was a philosopher. After all, a story was a story. He did not bother showing them the opal of Ts Ah-nyi which he still possessed, the opal which had glistened and glowed with a wondrous fire but which was now dead, as dead and cold as the bones of old prophets.

"A man may lie," mused Li Kan, "but a rare jewel never does." And he drew loudly and long at his old bamboo pipe of vile tobacco.