

Frozen Ground

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HO LING was Cantonese, and his astuteness all that the derivation implies. To the native mind "Joss" shone out glaringly from his face, in the deep smallpox pittings, in the flaring of the ears, and in the unbroken sweep of the eyebrows across the bridge of his nose. His face, his appearance, his furnishings, bespoke opulence, from his shell-rimmed spectacles, through his jade bracelets, to his red, plush-covered chairs on which he never sat. Ho Ling was a power, and his "face" was immense.

He was sitting on the *k'ang* and luxuriating in the kitchen gases which passed through its interior. Thoughtfully he manipulated his water pipe. Thoughtfully he glanced at the vertical columns of the morning paper. With what might or might not have been indifference he read the little paragraph headed in sprawling characters. "Plague Outbreak at Kwang Cheng-tzu." Solemnly he looked out through the central bit of glass in his shell-paned window.

Outside, across the broad stretch of water-front, chopping a little as the west wind contended with the newly flooding tide, he saw the great, brown river. Struggling against the current was a lumber-raft. Bulky and low-lying it was, with its logs chafing at the withes that bound them. The three-hundred-mile journey from the nearest forests of the T'ieh Ling had not improved its seaworthiness. Silhouetted against the river, its six rowers worked

with a unison found in Greek friezes. A gust of wind struck the pane. Ho Ling, his southern nature recoiling, in spite of years of acclimatization, from the Manchurian cold, shivered. Then impassively, apparently aimlessly, he spoke.

"The river will freeze in two weeks more," he said.

II.

KWANG Li, fat and prosperous, but whose attire in its bulginess of cotton padding bespoke the Third Estate, basked in the shelter of his lumber-yard's north wall and watched his coolies sweat at the long rip-saws. To him, his membership in the plutocracy proclaimed by shimmering satin and glistening fur, approached Ho Ling.

"Hao," remarked the power. "may health attend you."

"Hao," replied Kwang Li. "Will the precious guest avail himself of my mean hospitality?"

Ho Ling bowed, and Kwang brewed a pot of tea from the steaming samovar in the yard corner. Silently the two men drank, and watched the mahogany-hued, half-naked coolies as they tugged at the saws and slowly reduced the logs to massive boards. The little puddles of water the compound bore a skiff of ice, and still Kwang Li's minions sweated until their head-cloths hung heavy, soaked.

Suddenly Ho Ling became voluble. He spoke enthusiastically of the soya beans that he hoped to obtain through Kwang next spring. He suggested elaborate plans for getting out from the interior the coming silk crop—plans which only Kwang could carry out. He enlarged upon the possibilities and benefits—to Kwang—of the straw-mat trade in years to come. Then he veered to the talk of timber. Always agreeing, Kwang Li listened.

“A lumber-yard must eat you up in winter,” he remarked.

“Everything is unprofitable here.”

“I should think you would want to sell off—”

“So. But I heard talk said that some one buys up all the lumber. If these be true words—” Kwang Li regarded a sparrow attentively as he stroked the long hairs of a cherished mole.

Inwardly Ho Ling cursed that uncanny Oriental intelligence system that conveys news so much faster than word or wire. Outwardly no muscle of face or hand or body moved. Scornfully he went on:

“Living picture! What wild words! Now—”

The contest was on. For half an hour it continued with spittings and revilings and contemptuous leavetakings. Suddenly they stopped; the inevitable compromise had been effected. They, sauntered slowly to Ho Ling’s house, and a writer was told to draw up the contract. Waiting, they drank endless cups of tea and exchanged occasional monosyllables.

The *shroff* came with the contract. Ceremoniously they signed. Then Kwang Li spoke, with relief and curiosity fully apparent

“But for what do you want all the heavy wood in town? It’s not the season to build. For why?”

“May Heaven drip death on you!” reviled Ho Ling, become affable “Who knows? I may buy a new woman and everything must glitter for them at first. Or maybe I want to make you a coffin, Master Kwang.”

“You honor me excessively,” said Kwang seriously.

III.

HO LING sat in his patch of sunlit. Outside a tireless wind, sweeping from Gobi over the great southern plain, rattled his pebble-paved yard. Across the “bund” he watched the river, swirling its

seven miles an hour at the behest of the tide, with the big, white ice-floes spinning like tops. All that was needed for the final sealing of the stream was slack water and the thermometer twenty below. Ho Ling’s two weeks were up.

Ho Ling sunned himself, read the morning’s paper, and toiled ceaselessly with his water-pipe. A minute’s manipulation of tobacco, of tapers, and of heated skewers resulted in three gurgling puffs. A lengthy cleaning process, and the ceremony would begin again.

All the while Ho Ling’s eyes—they were dull and glazed when at rest—wandered. From the pipe to the river, to the bund, to the door, they strayed. Now they lit on his warehouse door, and the look of inscrutability returned. But always his glance came back to the scrawly newspaper, with its vertical writing and its horizontal columns. Always his eyes lit up as he read of plague, plague, everywhere plague, at Harbin, at Kwang Cheng-tzu, at Liao Yang, at Mukden.

And then the paper would be put down, the pipe taken up, and again the eyes would glaze. Ho Ling was waiting.

There was a scratch at the narrow door.

“Come!” he called.

The wooden hinges creaked and a woman came through the door. Her shoulders were bowed, though her years were not more than twenty-two. Her clothing, cotton-padded, stiff with dirt, announced her class, while the Manchu headdress, over which her unkempt hair was stretched, told of her race. On her back she carried a child.

Ho Ling recognized Kwang Li’s wife. In spite of her rank and her sex, he assumed his politest manner. All traces of expectancy seemed to vanish.

“Are you wanting anything, High-born Lady of Kwang?”

“I don’t want anything, Venerable Ho, but since I’m here, I’d like to talk about those outside-country stoves you sell.”

They chatted warmly for fifteen minutes, Kwang Lao Mu bargaining spiritedly for stoves, lamps, a phonograph, and a watch. It was Ho Ling who brought up the subject of coffins. At the mention Mrs. Kwang blinked openly. Then she plunged on.

“Yes, a coffin is always a fine thing to have. You know we have no need for one, but they always make handsome ornaments, there’s no denying. We

have an empty northwest corner in our house that a nicely varnished coffin would just fit. Could you make us—”

“By extreme good luck, Mrs. Kwang, I happen to have several in my godown already made.” He commenced a long speech on coffins, coffin-making, and the general superiority of Ho Ling coffins over all others. Then he shot:

“But of course, Mrs. Kwang, you do not want to buy without first talking with your man. Why didn’t he come this morning?”

Kwang Lao Mu blinked again.

“The father of my Pao-tzu,” she replied, “has a little sickness this morning. A small, small cold.”

“What a pity! What a sorrow! It isn’t any more serious than that?”

“No. Indeed no. He only coughs somewhat.”

“He does not cough—blood?”

Mrs. Kwang’s eyes popped. He knew!

“What flock of crows or tortoises has told you,” she cried. “You have seen the mission doctor.”

“*Shih*,” confirmed Ho Ling. “It is *wen-ping*, the plague.”

Pao-tzu’s mother clasped her hands for an instant. Then she demanded:

“How much?”

“Thirty taels.”

“Robber! Never was a coffin of that sort bought for more than fifteen. Have you no coffined forbears that you—Twenty.”

“If the revered ancestress grudges the insignificant thirty taels, she can doubtless go to other merchants in the town and get coffins, inferior far to those bearing the Ho Ling chop, but cheaper.”

Kwang Lao Mu surrendered. Ever since she had learned from the other timber merchants—she had made the rounds of them all—that Ho Ling had a monopoly, she had known herself to be in his power. The ground was frozen too hard to permit of burial before spring, and a coffin she must have. Slowly she nodded her head, and, fumbling in her coat, produced an ingot of silver as she said:

“This we were to eat this winter.”

But Ho Ling did not hear her. With covetous eyes he looked at the heavy “shoe,” which he estimated to weigh at least forty taels, and, as he looked, thought of raising his price. But Ho Ling had a reputation to maintain. Never had he changed a price after it had once been agreed upon.

Resolutely he cast the temptation aside.

Instead he called his *shroff*, and, in ordering the scales to weigh the shoe, secretly specified a pair in which weight and truth registered an equal minimum.

IV.

“THE fat man
Opened a shop.
He had no money,
So he pawned his trousers.”

Mrs. Kwang was droning. In time with the uncouth rhythm she applied a coat of Ning-po varnish over the new coffin.

It was four o’clock and already dark. A tiny oil-lamp cleared the night of the room into dusk. The somber walls were barely detectable by the projection upon them of Kwang Lao Mu’s flickering shadow, itself of little darker hue. Only in the center of the room was there a true gleam, the dull sheen of the Ning-po varnish on the coffin.

A current of cold air told Mrs. Kwang that the door was open. She looked up and saw on the sill Davis, the mission doctor. Broad of foot, broad of forehead, broad of shoulder, bulkily wrapped in an ungainly robe of white, he filled the whole low doorway.

“How’s your man?” asked Davis.

“Ai-i,” wailed the woman. “Dead! Ai-i—” With a convulsive movement she tore off the heavy Manchu headdress. Bending to the floor she powdered dust on her unbound tresses, crooning the wail of the north, a wail not much unlike her previous song.

“Quit that!” ordered Davis sharply. Kwang Lao Mu stopped.

Davis pushed back the cowl of his robe and with one comprehensive glance examined the room. Through the gloom he made out the sheen of the varnish on the coffin, and came bluntly to the point.

“Why do you varnish it? This is no time for *feng-shui*, for geomancy. He must be buried at once.”

“It is not *feng-shui*. Who are we to await lucky days? We are too poor to employ geomancers. Our dish is broken and the gruel leaked out.”

“Then for why the varnish? You must bury

him, and very quickly.”

“We can’t bury him. The ground is frozen hard. Now, in the spring—”

“H-m,” said Davis. “Now there’s hell to pay.”

For a matter of thirty seconds he stood motionless, his heavy chin sunk on his chest. Then he produced a note-book and stubby pencil. With nervous decision he dashed off two lines, and called out. A lackey, one of four in his train, stepped gingerly over the door-sill.

“Take this *chit* to Standard Oil, to *Mei foo*,” ordered David. “Have those twenty carts of oil here by seven.” Then he turned abruptly to the woman.

“The body must burn,” he said curtly.

The vanish-stick subsided into the pot with a slithering splash as Lao Mu leaped to her feet.

“No!” she cried. “That cannot be. How can he join his ancestors, how can we worship him, when the only resting-place of his spirit is destroyed? I do not condemn his soul to a homeless sojourn and a beingless hereafter. No! Not that hua! Ai-i—”

Davis set himself shamelessly to manufacturing mythology:

“No tumult, woman! Listen. This sickness is not like other illness: It is caused by a demon, that is true enough. But these are no ordinary devils. These are the *T’u Kui*. So evil are they that the very gods cannot bear their presence and have banished them away. Their punishment it is to be imprisoned in the body of a man forever. The man whom they afflict must die—it is the *wen-ping*. But, living or dead, they do not desert the body—unless the body be destroyed.”

Dully the woman looked toward the coffin. “These are not the words spoken at your church,” she cast back at him. Davis hesitated.

There was a stir in the corner of the *k’ang*. Pao-tzu uncoiled himself from his ragged cotton quilt and looked around uncertainly. Spying the burnish of the coffin’s varnish, he laboriously crawled toward it. Kwang Lao Mu jumped toward him. With a stream of affectionate abuse, she rolled him back and tangled him in the quilt.

“It is death and worse!” she cried. “Lie still!”

Davis pressed the obvious advantage.

“Living or dead, it is the same. While the body, while the bones lie there, there stays the demon. Bad luck he brings and ruin, and while he stays the homeless spirit of Kwang Li flutters around in the great void, restless and alone. He blights the house

where the body lies, he ruins the *feng-shui* of the burial plot. Only when the body is destroyed can the *T’u Kui* go free and the spirit seek repose. Better no body at all than one desecrated by a devil. It must burn.”

“Ai-i,” groaned Mrs. Kwang. “Ai-i.” Burying her head in Pao-tzu’s quilt, she quivered with hacking sobs.

V.

LAZILY Ho Ling rubbed his eyes. With feline luxury he stretched himself until his joints cracked. Slowly he raised himself to a sitting position and reached for his water-pipe. Outside the sun had just shot up. With the trace of a self-satisfied smirk, Ho Ling looked through the little pane at his godown door. Then his jaw dropped. There was no one there.

He heard a scratch at the door. “Come!” he called.

The door opened cautiously. Slowly, her head bowed, her hair disheveled, entered Mrs. Kwang. She was breathing hard.

Ho Ling resumed his affable politeness. “Please be seated, Mrs. Kwang,” he said.

“My thirty taels!” she gasped, still standing.

Ho Ling blinked. “What thirty taels?”

“For the coffin. I don’t need it. I want my thirty taels.”

“Your man has recovered? Well, well—”

“He died. Ai-i,” she wailed appropriately.

“Hush, woman. Then why don’t you need the coffin?” Indecisively Ho Ling scratched his chin with the long, well-cared-for nail of a little finger.

“Because the body must be burned.”

“Burned! But his ancestors, his child—My dear Mrs. Kwang—”

“Yes, burned. The outside-country pig ordered it. There he lay in the coffin, all in white—Ai-i,” she began.

Ho Ling galvanized into action, his indecision and politeness gone.

“Hush, spawn!” he cried. “What a liver! What a gall! You put your man in the coffin. You use the coffin. You defile the coffin! And now you want to sell it back. Decayed tortoise-egg—go! Go back to your accursed coffin! May you need it soon!”

As he spoke he hustled Kwang Lao Mu out of the door. At the threshold he gave her a final shove

and slammed the leaves to. Then, with every shadow of emotion wiped off his face, he returned to the little window. The godown entrance was still deserted. He realized that it would stay deserted. The coffin market had slumped.

Slowly he sat down on the *k'ang*.

Automatically he reached for the water-pipe. Taking the red-hot skewer, he plunged it into the pinch of tobacco and methodically pulled thrice. The last puff was almost a sigh. Then he spoke:

“To-morrow must come. There will be cholera with the rains.”