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The Fox Woman

by

Abraham Merritt

CHAPTER I

THE ANCIENT STEPS wound up the side of the mountain through the tall pines, patience trodden deep into them by the feet of twenty centuries. Some soul of silence, ancient and patient as the steps, brooded over them. They were wide, twenty men could have marched abreast upon them; lichens brown and orange traced strange symbols on their grey stones, and emerald mosses cushioned them. At times the steps climbed steep as stairs, and at times they swept leisurely around bastions of the mountain, but always on each side the tall pines stood close, green shoulder to shoulder, vigilant.

At the feet of the pines crouched laurels and dwarfed rhododendrons of a singular regularity of shape and of one height, that of a kneeling man. Their stiff and glossy leaves were like links on coats-of-mail...like the jade-lacquered scale-armor of the Green Archers of Kwanyin who guard the goddess when she goes forth in the Spring to awaken the trees. The pines were like watchful sentinels, and oddly like crouching archers were the laurels and the dwarfed rhododendrons, and they said as plainly as though with tongues: Up these steps you may go, and down them--but never try to pass through us!

A woman came round one of the bastions. She walked stubbornly, head down, as one who fights against a strong wind--or as one whose will rides, lashing the reluctant body on. One white shoulder and breast were bare, and on the shoulder was a bruise and blood, four scarlet streaks above the purpled patch as though a long-nailed hand had struck viciously, clawing. And as she walked she wept.

The steps began to lift. The woman raised her head and saw how steeply here they climbed. She stopped, her hands making little fluttering helpless motions.

She turned, listening. She seemed to listen not with ears alone but with every tensed muscle, her entire body one rapt chord of listening through which swept swift arpeggios of terror. The brittle twilight of the Yunnan highlands, like clearest crystal made impalpable, fell upon brown hair shot with gleams of dull copper, upon a face lovely even in its dazed horror. Her grey eyes stared down the steps, and it was as though they, too, were listening rather than seeing...

She was heavy with child...

She heard voices beyond the bend of the bastion, voices guttural and sing-song, angry and arguing, protesting and urging. She heard the shuffle of many feet, hesitating, halting, but coming inexorably on. Voices and feet of the hung-hutzes, the outlaws who had slaughtered her husband and Kenwood and their bearers a scant hour ago, and who but for Kenwood would now have her. They had found her trail.

She wanted to die; desperately Jean Meredith wanted to die; her faith taught her that then she would rejoin that scholarly, gentle lover-husband of hers whom she had loved so dearly although his years had been twice her own. It would not matter did they kill her quickly, but she knew they would not do that. And she could not endure even the thought of what must befall her through them before death came. Nor had she weapon to kill herself. And there was that other life budding beneath her heart.

But stronger than desire for death, stronger than fear of torment, stronger than the claim of the unborn was something deep within her that cried for vengeance. Not vengeance against the hung-hutzes--they were only a pack of wild beasts doing what was their nature to do. This cry was for vengeance against those who had loosed them, directed them. For this she knew had been done, although how she knew it she could not yet tell. It was not accident, no chance encounter that swift slaughter. She was sure of that.

It was like a pulse, that cry for vengeance; a pulse whose rhythm grew, deadening grief and terror, beating strength back into her. It was like a bitter spring welling up around her soul. When its dark waters had risen far enough they would touch her lips and she would drink of them . . . and then knowledge would come to her . . . she would know who had planned this evil thing, and why. But she must have time--time to drink of the waters--time to learn and avenge. She must live...for vengeance ...

Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!

It was as though a voice had whispered the old text in her ear. She struck her breast with clenched hands; she looked with eyes grown hard and tearless up to the tranquil sky; she answered the voice:

"A lie! Like all the lies I have been taught of--You! I am through with--You! Vengeance! Whoever gives me vengeance shall be my God!"

The voices and the feet were nearer. Strange, how slowly, how reluctantly they advanced. It was as though they were afraid. She studied the woods beyond the pines. Impenetrable; or if not, then impossible for her. They would soon find her if she tried to hide there. She must go on--up the steps. At their end might be some hiding place...perhaps sanctuary...

Yes, she was sure the hung-hutzes feared the steps... they came so slowly, so haltingly...arguing, protesting...

She had seen another turn at the top of this steep. If she could reach it before they saw her, it might be that they would follow her no further. She turned to climb...

A fox stood upon the steps a dozen feet above her, watching her, barring her way. It was a female fox, a vixen. Its coat was all silken russet-red. It had a curiously broad head and slanted green eyes. On its head was a mark, silver white and shaped like the flame of a candle wavering in the wind.

The fox was lithe and graceful, Jean Meredith thought, as a dainty woman. A mad idea came, born of her despair and her denial of that God whom she had been taught from childhood to worship as all-good, all-wise, all-powerful. She thrust her hands out to the fox. She cried to it:

"Sister--you are a woman! Lead me to safety that I may have vengeance--sister!"

Remember, she had just seen her husband die under the knives of the hung-hutzes and she was with child... and who can know upon what fantastic paths of unreality a mind so beset may stray.

As though it had understood the fox paced slowly down the steps. And again she thought how like a graceful woman it was. It paused a little beyond reach of her hand, studying her with those slanted green eyes--eyes clear and brilliant as jewels, sea-green, and like no eyes she had ever seen in any animal. There seemed faint mockery in their gaze, a delicate malice, but as they rested upon her bruised shoulder and dropped to her swollen girdle, she could have sworn that there was human comprehension in them, and pity. She whispered:

"Sister--help me!"

There was a sudden outburst of the guttural singsong. They were close now, her pursuers, close to the bend of the steps round which she had come. Soon they must turn it and see her. She stood staring at the fox expectantly...hoping she knew not what.

The fox slipped by her, seemed to melt in the crouching bushes. It vanished.

Black despair, the despair of a child who finds itself abandoned to wild beasts by one it has trusted, closed in on Jean Meredith. What she had hoped for, what she had expected of help, was vague, unformulated. A miracle by alien gods, now she had renounced her own? Or had her appeal to the vixen deeper impulse? Atavistic awakenings, anthropomorphic, going back to that immemorial past when men first thought of animals and birds as creatures with souls like theirs, but closer to Nature's spirit; given by that spirit a wisdom greater than human, and more than human powers--servants and messengers of potent deities and little less than gods themselves.

Nor has it been so long ago that St. Francis of Assisi spoke to the beasts and birds as he did to men and women, naming them Brother Wolf and Brother Eagle. And did not St. Conan baptize the seals of the Orkneys as he did the pagan men? The past and all that men have thought in the past is born anew within us all. And sometimes strange doors open within our minds--and out of them or into them strange spirits come or go. And whether real or unreal, who can say?

The fox seemed to understand--had seemed to promise--something. And it had abandoned her, fled away! Sobbing, she turned to climb the steps.

Too late! The hung-hutzes had rounded the bend.

There was a howling chorus. With obscene gestures, yapping threats, they ran toward her. Ahead of the pack was the pock-faced, half-breed Tibetan leader whose knife had been the first to cut her husband down. She watched them come, helpless to move, unable even to close her eyes. The pock-face saw and understood, gave quick command, and the pack slowed to a walk, gloating upon her agony, prolonging it.

They halted! Something like a flicker of russet flame had shot across the steps between her and them. It was the fox. It stood there, quietly regarding them. And hope flashed up through Jean Meredith, melting the cold terror that had frozen her. Power of motion returned. But she did not try to run. She did not want to run. The cry for vengeance was welling up again. She felt that cry reach out to the fox.

As though it had heard her, the fox turned its head and looked at her. She saw its green eyes sparkle, its white teeth bared as though it smiled.

Its eyes withdrawn, the spell upon the hung-hutzes broke. The leader drew pistol, fired upon the fox.

Jean Meredith saw, or thought she saw, the incredible.

Where fox had been, stood now a woman! She was tall, and lithe as a young willow. Jean Meredith could not see her face, but she could see hair of russet-red coifed upon a small and shapely head. A silken gown of russet-red, sleeveless, dropped to the woman's feet. She raised an arm and pointed at the pock-faced leader. Behind him his men were silent, motionless, even as Jean Meredith had been--and it came to her that it was the same ice of terror that held them. Their eyes were fixed upon the woman.

The woman's hand dropped--slowly. And as it dropped, the pock-faced Tibetan dropped with it. He sank to his knees and then upon his hands. He stared into her face, lips drawn back from his teeth like a snarling dog, and there was foam upon his lips. Then he hurled himself upon his men, like a wolf. He sprang upon them howling; he leaped up at their throats, tearing at them with teeth and talons. They milled, squalling rage and bewildered terror. They tried to beat him off--they could not.

There was a flashing of knives. The pock-face lay writhing on the steps, like a dog dying. Still squalling, never looking behind them, his men poured down the steps and away.

Jean Meredith's hands went up, covering her eyes. She dropped them--a fox, all silken russet-red, stood where the woman had been. It was watching her. She saw its green eyes sparkle, its white teeth bared as though it smiled--it began to walk daintily up the steps toward her.

Weakness swept over her; she bent her head, crumpled to her knees, covered again her eyes with shaking hands. She was aware of an unfamiliar fragrance--disturbing, evocative of strange, fleeting images. She heard low, sweet laughter. She heard a Soft voice whisper:

"Sister!"

She looked up. A woman's face was bending over her. An exquisite face...with sea-green, slanted eyes under a broad white brow...with hair of russet-red that came to a small peak in the center of that brow...a lock of silvery white shaped like the flame of a candle wavering in the wind...a nose long but delicate, the nostrils slightly flaring, daintily...a mouth small and red as the royal coral, heart-shaped, lips full, archaic.

Over that exquisite face, like a veil, was faint mockery, a delicate malice that had in them little of the human. Her hands were white and long and slender.

They touched Jean Meredith's heart...soothing her, strengthening her, drowning fear and sorrow.

She heard again the sweet voice, lilting, faintly amused--with the alien, half-malicious amusement of one who understands human emotion yet has never felt it, but knows how little it matters:

"You shall have your vengeance--Sister!" The white hands touched her eyes...she forgot... and forgot...and now there was nothing to remember...not even herself...

It seemed to Jean Meredith that she lay cushioned within soft, blind darkness--illimitable, impenetrable. She had no memories; all that she knew was that she was. She thought: I am I. The darkness that cradled her was gentle, kindly. She thought: I am a spirit still unborn in the womb of night. But what was night...and what was spirit? She thought: I am content--I do not want to be born again. Again? That meant that she had been born before...a word came to her--Jean. She thought: I am Jean...but who was Jean?

She heard two voices speaking. One a woman's, soft and sweet with throbbing undertones like plucked harp strings. She had heard that voice before...before, when she had been Jean. The man's voice was low, filled with tranquillity, human...that was it, the voice held within it a humanness the sweet voice of the woman lacked. She thought: I, Jean, am human...

The man said: "Soon she must awaken. The tide of sleep is high on the shore of life. It must not cover it."

The woman answered: "I command that tide. And it has begun to ebb. Soon she will awaken."

He asked: "Will she remember?"

The woman said: "She will remember. But she will not suffer. It will be as though what she remembers had happened to another self of hers. She will pity that self, but it will be to her as though it died when died her husband. As indeed it did. That self bears the sorrow, the pain, the agony. It leaves no legacy of them to her--save memory."

And now it seemed to her that for a time there was a silence...although she knew that time could not exist within the blackness that cradled her...and what was--time?

The man's voice broke that silence, musingly: "With memory there can be no happiness for her, long as she lives."

The woman laughed, a tingling-sweet mocking chime: "Happiness? I thought you wiser than to cling to that illusion, priest. I give her serenity, which is far better than happiness. Nor did she ask for happiness. She asked for vengeance. And vengeance she shall have."

The man said: "But she does not know who--"

The woman interrupted: "She does know. And I know. And so shall you when you have told her what was wrung from the Tibetan before he died. And if you still do not believe, you will believe when he who is guilty comes here, as come he will--to kill the child."

The man whispered: "To kill the child!"

The woman's voice became cold, losing none of its sweetness but edged with menace: "You must not let him have it, priest. Not then. Later, when the word is given you...."

Again the voice grew mocking..."I contemplate a journey...I would see other lands, who so long have dwelt among these hills...and I would not have my plans spoiled by precipitancy..." Once more Jean Meredith heard the tingling laughter. "Have no fear, priest. They will help you--my sisters."

He said, steadily: "I have no fear."

The woman's voice became gentle, all mockery fled. She said:

"I know that, you who have had wisdom and courage to open forbidden doors. But I am bound by a threefold cord--a promise, a vow, and a desire. When a certain time comes, I must surrender

much--must lie helpless, bound by that cord. It is then that I shall need you, priest, for this man who will come...."

The voices faded. Slowly the blackness within which she lay began to lighten. Slowly, slowly, a luminous greyness replaced it. She thought, desperately: I am going to be born! I don't want to be born! Implacably, the light increased. Now within the greyness was a nimbus of watery emerald. The nimbus became brighter, brighter...

She was lying upon a low bed, in a nest of silken cushions. Close to her was an immense and ancient bronze vessel, like a baptismal font. The hands of thousands of years had caressed it, leaving behind them an ever deepening patina like a soft green twilight. A ray of the sun shone upon it, and where the ray rested, the patina gleamed like a tiny green sun. Upon the sides of the great bowl were strange geometric patterns, archaic, the spirals and meanders of the Lei-wen--the thunder patterns. It stood upon three legs, tripodal...why, it was the ancient ceremonial vessel, the Tang font which Martin had brought home from Yunnan years ago...and she was back home...she had dreamed that she had been in China and that Martin...that Martin...

She sat up abruptly and looked through wide, opened doors into a garden. Broad steps dropped shallowly to an oval pool around whose sides were lithe willows trailing green tendrils in the blue water, wisterias with drooping ropes of blossoms, white and pale azure, and azaleas like flower flames. Rosy lilies lay upon the pool's breast. And at its far end was a small pagoda, fairy-like, built all of tiles of iridescent peacock blue and on each side a stately cypress, as though they were its ministers...why, this was their garden, the garden of the blue pagoda which Martin had copied from that place in Yunnan where lived his friend, the wise old priest...

But there was something wrong. These mountains were not like those of the ranch. They were conical, their smooth bare slopes of rose-red stone circled with trees..they were like huge stone hats with green brims...

She turned again and looked about the room. It was a wide room and a deep one, but how deep she could not see, because the sun streaming in from a high window struck the ancient vessel and made a curtain, veiling it beyond. She could see that there were beams across its ceiling, mellow with age, carved with strange symbols. She caught glimpses of ivory and of gleaming lacquer. There was a low altar of what seemed green jade, curiously carved and upon which were ceremonial objects of unfamiliar shape, a huge ewer of bronze whose lid was the head of a fox.. ..

A man came toward her, walking out of the shadows beyond the ancient Tang vessel. He was clothed from neck to feet in a silken robe of silvery-blue upon which were embroidered, delicately as though by spiders, Taoist symbols and under them, ghostly in silver threads, a fox's head. He was bald, his face heavy, expressionless, skin smooth and faded yellow as some antique parchment. So far as age went he might have been sixty--or three hundred. But it was his eyes that held Jean Meredith. They were large and black and, liquid, and prodigiously alive. They were young eyes, belying the agelessness of the heavy face; and it was as though the face was but a mask from which the eyes had drawn all life into themselves. They poured into her strength and calmness and reassurance, and from her mind vanished all vagueness, all doubts, all fears. Her mind for the first time since the ambush was clear, crystal clear, her thoughts her own.

She remembered--remembered everything. But it was as though all had happened to another self. She felt pity for that self, but it had left no heritage of sorrow. She was tranquil. The black, youthful eyes poured tranquillity into her.

She said: "I know you. You are Yu Ch'ien, the wise priest my husband loved. This is the Temple of the

Foxes."

CHAPTER II

"I AM Yu CH'EN, my daughter." His voice was the man's voice which she had heard when cradled in the darkness.

She tried to rise, then swayed back upon the bed, weakness overcoming her.

He said: "A night and a day, and still another night and half this day you have slept, and now you must eat." He spoke the English words slowly, as one whose tongue had long been stranger to them.

He clapped his hands and a woman slipped by the great vase through the bars of the sunlight. She was ageless as he, with broad shrewd face and tilted sloeblack eyes that were kindly yet very wise. A smock covered her from full breasts to knees, and she was sturdy and strong and brown as though she had been carved from seasoned wood. In her hands was a tray upon which was a bowl of steaming broth and oaten cakes.

The woman sat beside Jean Meredith, lifting her head, resting it against her deep bosom and feeding her like a child, and now Jean saw that herself was naked except for a thin robe of soft blue silk and that upon it was the moon-silver symbol of the fox.

The priest nodded, his eyes smiled upon her. "Fienwi will attend you. Soon you will be stronger. Soon I shall return. Then we shall talk."

He passed out of the wide doors. The woman fed her the last of the broth, the last of the little cakes. She left her, and returned with bowls of bronze in which was water hot and cold; undressed her; ministered to her, bathed her and rubbed her; dressed her in fresh silken robes of blue; strapped sandals to her feet, and smiling, left her. Thrice Jean essayed to speak to her, but the woman only shook her head, answering in a lisping dialect, no sound of which she recognized.

The sun had moved from the great Tang font. She lay back, lazily. Her mind was limpidly clear; upon it was reflected all through which she had passed, yet it was tranquil, untroubled, like a woodland pool that reflects the storm clouds but whose placid surface lies undisturbed. The things that had happened were only images reflected upon her mind. But under that placid surface was something implacable, adamant-hard, something that would have been bitter did it not know that it was to be satisfied.

She thought over what Martin had told her of Yu Ch'ien. A Chinese whose forefathers had been enlightened rulers ten centuries before the Man of Galilee had been raised upon the cross, who had studied Occidental thought both in England and France, and had found little in it to satisfy his thirst for wisdom; who had gone back to the land of his fathers, embraced at last the philosophy of Lao-Tse, and had withdrawn from the world to an ancient fane in Yunnan known as the Temple of the Foxes, a temple revered and feared and around which strange legends clustered; there to spend his life in meditation and study.

What was it Martin had called him? Ah, yes, a master of secret and forgotten knowledge, a master of illusion. She knew that of all men, Martin had held Yu Ch'ien in profoundest respect, deepest affection...she wondered if the woman she had seen upon the steps had been one of his illusions...if the peace she felt came from him...if he had made sorrow and pain of soul illusions for her...and was she thinking the thoughts he had placed in her mind--or her own...she wondered dreamily, not much caring...

He came through the doors to her, and again it was as though his eyes were springs of tranquillity from which her soul drank deep. She tried to rise, to greet him; her mind was strong but through all her body

was languor. He touched her forehead, and the languor fled. He said:

"All is well with you, my daughter. But now we must talk. We will go into the garden."

He clapped his hands. The brown woman, Fien-wi, came at the summons, and with her two blue-smocked men bearing a chair. The woman lifted her, placed her in the chair. The men carried her out of the wide doors, down the shallow steps to the blue pool. She looked behind her as she went.

The temple was built into the brow of the mountain. It was of brown stone and brown wood. Slender pillars hard bitten by the teeth of the ages held up a curved roof of the peacock blue tiles. From the wide doors through which she had come a double row of sculptured foxes ran, like Thebes' road of the Sphynxes, half way down to the pool. Over the crest of the mountain crept the ancient steps up which she had stumbled. Where the steps joined the temple, stood a tree covered all with white blossoms. It wavered in the wind like the flame of a candle.

Strangely was the temple like the head of a fox, its muzzle between the paws of the rows of sculptured foxes, the crest of the mountain its forehead and the white blossoming tree, like the lock of white upon the forehead of the fox of the steps...and the white lock upon the forehead of the woman...

They were at the pool. There was a seat cut at the end, facing the blue pagoda. The woman Fien-wi piled the stone with cushions and, as she waited, Jean Meredith saw that there were arms to this seat and that at the end of each was the head of a fox, and that over its back was a tracery of dancing foxes; and she saw, too, that on each side of the seat tiny paths had been cut in stone leading to the water, as though for some small-footed creatures to trot upon and drink.

She was lifted to the stone chair, and sank into the cushions. Except for the seat and the little runways, it was as though she sat beside the pool Martin had built at their California ranch. There, as here, the willows dipped green tendrils into the water; there, as here, drooped ropes of wisteria, pale amethyst and white. And here as there was peace.

Yu Ch'ien spoke: "A stone is thrown into a pool. The ripples spread and break against the shore. At last they cease and the pool is as before. Yet when the stone strikes, as it sinks and while the ripples live, microscopic lives within the pool are changed. But not for long. The stone touches bottom, the pool again becomes calm. It is over, and life for the tiny things is as before."

She said quietly, out of the immense clarity of her mind: "You mean, Yu Ch'ien, that my husband's murder was such a stone."

He went on, as though she had not spoken: "But there is life within life, and over life, and under life--as we know life. And that which happens to the tiny things within the pool may be felt by those beneath and above them. Life is a bubble in which are lesser bubbles which we cannot see, and the bubble we call life is only part of a greater bubble which also we may not see. But sometimes we perceive those bubbles, sometimes glimpse the beauty of the greater, sense the kinship of the lesser...and sometimes a lesser life touches ours and then we speak of demons...and when the greater ones touch us we name it inspiration from Heaven, an angel speaking through our lips--"

She interrupted, thought crystal clear: "I understand you, Martin's murder was the stone. It would pass with its ripples--but it has disturbed some pool within which it was a lesser pool. Very well, what then?"

He said: "There are places in this world where the veil between it and the other worlds is thin. They can enter. Why it is so, I do not know--but I know it is so. The ancients recognized such places. They named those who dwelt unseen there the *genii locorum*--literally, the spirits of the places. This mountain, this temple, is such a place. It is why I came to it."

She said: "You mean the fox I saw upon the steps. You mean the woman I thought I saw take the place of that fox, and who drove the Tibetan mad. The fox I asked to help me and to give me revenge, and whom I called sister. The woman I thought I saw who whispered to me that I should have revenge and who called me sister. Very well, what then?"

He answered: "It is true. The murder of your husband was the stone. Better to have let the ripples die. But there was this place..there was a moment...and now the ripples cannot die until--"

Again she interrupted the true thought--or what she believed the true thought--flashing up through her mind like sun-glints from jewels at a clear pool's bottom. "I had denied my God. Whether he exists or does not, I had stripped myself of my armor against those other lives. I did it where and when such other lives, if they exist, could strike. I accept that. And again, what then?"

He said: "You have a strong soul, my daughter."

She answered, with a touch of irony: "While I was within the blackness, before I awakened, I seemed to hear two persons talking, Yu Ch'ien. One had your voice, and the other the voice of the fox woman who called me sister. She promised me serenity. Well, I have that. And having it, I am as unhuman as was her voice. Tell me, Yu Ch'ien, whom my husband called master of illusions, was that woman upon the steps one of your illusions, and was her voice another? Does my serenity come from her or from you? I am no child, and, I know how easily you could accomplish this, by drugs or by your will while I lay helpless."

He said: "My daughter, if they were illusions--they were not mine. And if they were illusions, then I, like you, am a victim to them."

She asked: "You mean you have seen--her?"

He answered: "And her sisters. Many times."

She said shrewdly: "Yet that does not prove her real--she might have passed from your mind to mine."

He did not answer. She asked abruptly: "Shall I live?"

He replied without hesitation. "No."

She considered that for a little, looking at the willow tendrils, the ropes of wisteria. She mused: "I did not ask for happiness, but she gives me serenity. I did not ask for life, so she gives me--vengeance. But I no longer care for vengeance."

He said gravely: "It does not matter. You struck into that other life. You asked, and you were promised. The ripples upon the greater pool cannot cease until that promise is fulfilled."

She considered that, looking at the conical hills. She laughed. "They are like great stone hats with brims of green. What are their faces like, I wonder." He asked: "Who killed your husband?" She answered, still smiling at the hatted hills: "Why, his brother, of course."

He asked: "How do you know that?"

She lifted her arms and twined her hands behind her neck. She said, as impersonally as though she read from a book: "I was little more than twenty when I met Martin, Just out of college. He was fifty. But inside--he was a dreaming boy. Oh, I knew he had lots and lots of money. It didn't matter. I loved him--for the boy inside him. He asked me to marry him. I married him."

"Charles hated me from the beginning. Charles is his brother, fifteen years younger. Charles' wife hated

me. You see, there was no other besides Charles until I came. If Martin died--well, all his money would go to Charles. They never thought he would marry. For the last ten years Charles had looked after his business--his mines, his investments. I really don't blame Charles for hating me--but he shouldn't have killed Martin."

"We spent our honeymoon out on Martin's ranch. He has a pool and garden just like this, you know. It's just as beautiful, but the mountains around it have snowy caps instead of the stony, green-rimmed ones. And he had a great bronze vessel like that of yours. He told me that he had copied the garden from Yu Ch'ien's even to the blue pagoda. And that the vessel had a mate in Yu Ch'ien's Temple of the Foxes. And he told me...of you..."

"Then the thought came to him to return to you and your temple. Martin was a boy--the desire gripped him. I did not care, if it made him happy. So we came."

Charles with us as far as Nanking. Hating me, I knew, every mile of the journey. At Nanking--I told Martin I was going to have a baby. I had known it for months but I hadn't told him because I was afraid he would put off this trip on which he had set his heart. Now I knew I couldn't keep it secret much longer. Martin was so happy! He told Charles, who hated me then more than ever. And Martin made a will. If Martin should die, Charles was to act as trustee for me and the child, carry on the estate as before, with his share of the income increased. All the balance, and there are millions, was left to me and the coming baby. There was also a direct bequest of half a million to Charles.

"Martin read the will to him. I was present. So was Kenwood, Martin's secretary. I saw Charles turn white, but outwardly he was pleasantly acquiescent, concerned only lest something really might happen to his brother. But I guessed what was in his heart."

"Kenwood liked me, and he did not like Charles. He came to me one night in Nanking, a few days before we were to start for Yunnan. He tried to dissuade me from the journey. He was a bit vague about reasons, talked of my condition, hard traveling and so on, but that was ridiculous. At last I asked him point-blank--why? Then he said that Charles was secretly meeting a Chinese captain, by name--Li-kong. I asked what of it, he had a right to pick his friends. Kenwood said Likong was suspected of being in touch with certain outlaws operating in Szechwan and Yunnan, and of receiving and disposing of the best of their booty. Kenwood said: 'If both you and Martin die before the baby is born, Charles will inherit everything. He's next of kin and the only one, for you have nobody.' Kenwood said:"

"You're going up into Yunnan. How easy to send word to one of these bands to look out for you. And then brother Charles would have it all. Of course, there's no use saying anything to your husband. He trusts everybody, and Charles most of all. All that would happen would be my dismissal."

"And of course that was true. But I couldn't believe Charles, for all he hated me so, would do this to Martin. There were two of us, and Kenwood and a nice Scotch woman I found at Nanking, a Miss Mackenzie, who agreed to come along to look after me in event of my needing it. There were twenty of us in all--the others Chinese boys, thoroughly good, thoroughly dependable. We came North slowly, unhurriedly. I said that Martin was a boy inside. No need to tell you again of his affection for you. And he loved China--the old China. He said it lived now only in a few places, and Yunnan was first. And he had it in his mind that our baby should be born--here--"

She sat silent, then laughed. "And so it will be. But not as Martin dreamed ..." She was silent again. She said, as though faintly puzzled: "It was not--human--to laugh at that!" She went on serenely: "We came on and on slowly. Sampans on the rivers, and I by litter mostly. Always easily, easily...because of the baby. Then two weeks ago Kenwood told me that he had word we were to be attacked at a certain place. He had been years in China, knew how to get information and I knew he had watched and cajoled and

threatened and bribed ever since we had entered the hills. He said he, had arranged a counter-attack that would catch the trappers in their own trap. He cursed Charles dreadfully, saying he was behind it. He said that if we could only get to Yu Ch'ien we would be safe. Afterwards he told me that he must have been sold wrong information. The counter-attack had drawn blank. I told him he was letting his imagination run away with him.

"We went on. Then came the ambush. It wasn't a matter of ransom. It was a matter of wiping us out."

"They gave us no chance. So it must have been that we were worth more to them dead than alive. That realization came to me as I stood at the door of my tent and saw Martin cut down, poor Mackenzie fall. Kenwood could have escaped as I did--but he died to give me time to get away..."

"Yu Ch'ien, what have you done to me?" asked Jean Meredith, dreamily. "I have seen my husband butchered...I have seen a man give up his life for me...and still I feel no more emotion than as though they had been reeds under the sickle...what have you done to me, Yu Ch'ien?"

He answered: "Daughter--when you are dead, and all those now living are dead--will it matter?"

She answered, shaking her head: "But--I am not dead! Nor are those now living dead. And I should rather be human, Yu Ch'ien. And suffer," He said: "It may not be, my daughter." "I wish I could feel," she said. "Good God, but I wish I could feel..."

She said: "That is all. Kenwood threw himself in front of me. I ran. I came to wide steps. I climbed them--up and up. I saw a fox--I saw a woman where I had seen the fox--"

He said: "You saw a Tibetan, a half-caste, who threw himself upon those who followed you, howling like a mad dog. You saw that Tibetan cut down by the knives of his men. I came with my men before he died. We brought him here. I searched his dying mind. He told me that they had been hired to wipe out your party by a Shensi leader of hung-hutzes. And that he had been promised not only the loot of your party if all were slain, but a thousand taels besides. And that when he asked who guaranteed this sum, this leader, in his cups, had told him the Captain Li-kong."

She cupped her chin in hand, looked out over the blue pool to the pagoda. She said at last: "So Kenwood was right! And I am right. It was Charles..."

She said: "I feel a little, Yu Ch'ien. But what I feel is not pleasant. It is hate, Yu Ch'ien..."

She said: "I am only twenty-four. It is rather young to die, Yu Ch'ien, isn't it? But then--what was it your woman's voice said while I was in the darkness? That the self of mine whom I would pity died when Martin did? She was right, Yu Ch'ien--or you were. And I think I will not be sorry to join that other self."

The sun was sinking. An amethyst veil dropped over the conical mountains. Suddenly they seemed to flatten, to become transparent. The whole valley between the peaks grew luminously crystalline. The blue pagoda shone as though made of dark sapphires behind which little suns burned. She sighed: "It is very beautiful, Yu Ch'ien. I am glad to be here--until I die."

There was a patter of feet beside her. A fox came trotting down one of the carven runways. It looked up at her fearlessly with glowing green eyes. Another slipped from the cover of the pool and another and another. They lapped the blue water fearlessly, eyes glinting swift side-glances at her, curiously...

The days slipped by her, the weeks--a month. Each day she sat in the seat of the foxes beside the pool, watching the willows trail their tendrils, the lilies like great rosy pearls open and close and die and be reborn on the pool's blue breast; watching the crystalline green dusks ensorcell the conical peaks, and

watching the foxes that came when these dusks fell.

They were friendly now, the foxes--knew her, sat beside her, studying her; but never did she see the lithe fox with the lock of white between its slanting green eyes. She grew to know the brown woman Fien-wi and the sturdy servitors. And from the scattered villages pilgrims came to the shrine; they looked at her fearfully, shyly; as she sat on the seat of the foxes, prostrating themselves before her as though she were some spirit to be placated by worship.

And each day was as the day before, and she thought: Without sorrow, without fear, without gladness, without hope there is no difference between the days, and therefore what difference does it make if I die tomorrow or a year hence?

Whatever the anodyne that steeped her soul--whether from vague woman of the steps or from Yu Ch'ien--it had left her with no emotion. Except that she knew she must bear it, she had no feeling even toward her unborn baby. Once, indeed, she had felt a faint curiosity. That this wise priest of the Foxes' Temple had his own means of learning what he desired of the outer world, she was well aware.

She said: "Does Charles know as yet of the ambush--know that I am still alive?"

He answered: "Not yet. The messengers who were sent to Li-kong did not reach him. It will be weeks before he knows."

She said: "And then he will come here. Will the baby be born when he comes, Yu Ch'ien?"

He answered: "Yes."

"And shall I be alive, Yu Ch'ien?"

He did not answer. She laughed.

It was one twilight, in the middle of the Hour of the Dog, that she turned to him, sitting in the garden beside the pool.

"My time has come, Yu Ch'ien. The child stirs."

They carried her into the temple. She lay upon the bed, while the brown woman stooped over her, ministering to her, helping her. The only light in the temple chamber came from five ancient lanterns of milky jade through whose thin sides the candles gleamed, turning them into five small moons. She felt little pain. She thought: I owe that to Yu Ch'ien, I suppose. And the minutes fled by until it was the Hour of the Boar.

She heard a scratching at the temple door. The priest opened it. He spoke softly, one word, a word often on his lips, and she knew it meant "patience." She could see through the opened door into the garden. There were small globular green lights all about, dozens of them, like gnome lanterns.

She said drowsily: "My little foxes wait. Let them enter, Yu Ch'ien."

"Not yet, my daughter."

The Hour of the Boar passed. Midnight passed. There was a great silence in the temple. It seemed to her that all the temple was waiting, that even the unfaltering light of the five small moons on the altar was waiting. She thought: Even the child is waiting . . . and for what?

And suddenly a swift agony shook her and she cried out. The brown woman held tight her hands that

tried to beat the air. The priest called, and into the room came four of the sturdy servants of the temple. They carried large vessels in which was water steaming hot and water which did not steam and so, she reasoned idly, must be cold. They kept their backs to her, eyes averted.

The priest touched her eyes, stroked her flanks, and the agony was gone as swiftly as it had come. She watched the servants pour the waters into the ancient Tang font and slip away, backs still turned to her, faces averted.

She had not seen the door open, but there was a fox in the room. It was ghostly in the dim light of the jade lamps, yet she could see it stepping daintily toward her...a vixen, lithe and graceful as a woman...with slanted eyes, sea-green, brilliant as jewels..the fox of the steps whom she had called sister...

And now she was looking up into a woman's face. An exquisite face with sea-green, slanted eyes under a broad white brow, whose hair of russet-red came to a small peak in the center of that brow, and above the peak a lock of silvery white..the eyes gazed into hers, and although they caressed her, there was in them a faint mockery, a delicate malice.

The woman was naked. Although Jean Meredith could not wrest her own eyes from the slanting green ones, she could see the curve of delicate shoulders, the rounded breasts, the slender hips. It was as though the woman stood poised upon her own breasts, without weight, upon airy feet. There was a curious tingling coolness in her breasts...more pleasant than warmth... and it was as though the woman were sinking into her, becoming a part of her. The face came nearer...nearer..the eyes were now close to hers, and mockery and malice gone from them...in them was only gentleness and promise...she felt cool lips touch hers...

The face was gone. She was sinking, sinking, unresistingly...gratefully...through a luminous greyness ..then into a soft blind darkness...she was being cradled by it, sinking ever deeper and deeper. She cried out once, as though frightened: Martin! Then she cried again, voice vibrant with joy: Martin!

One of the five moon lamps upon the jade altar darkened. Went out.

The brown woman was prostrate upon her face beside the bed. The priest touched her with his foot. He said: "Prepare. Be swift." She bent over the still body.

There was a movement beside the altar. Four foxes stepped daintily from its shadows toward the Tang front. They were vixens, and they came like graceful women, and the coat of each was silken russet-red, their eyes brilliant, sea-green and slanting, and upon each forehead was a lock of silvery white. They drew near the brown woman, watching her.

The priest walked to the doors and threw them open. Into the temple slipped fox after fox...a score, two score..the temple filled with them. They ringed the ancient font, squatting, red tongues lolling, eyes upon the bed.

The priest walked to the bed. In his hand was a curiously shaped, slender knife of bronze, double-edged, sharp as a surgeon's knife. The brown woman threw herself again upon the floor. The priest leaned over the bed, began with a surgeon's deftness and delicacy to cut. The four vixens drew close, watching every movement---

Suddenly there wailed through the temple the querulous crying of a new-born child.

The priest walked from the bed toward the font....He held the child in his hands, and hands and child were red with blood. The vixens walked beside him. The foxes made way for them, closing their circles

as they passed. The four vixens halted, one at each of the font's four sides. They did not sit. They stood with gaze fastened upon the priest.

The priest ringed the font, bending before each of the four vixens, holding out the child until each had touched it with her tongue. He lifted the child by the feet, held it dangling head down, high above his head, turning so that all the other foxes could see it.

He plunged it five times into the water of the font.

As abruptly as the first moon lantern had gone out, so darkened the other four.

There was a rustling, the soft patter of many pads. Then silence.

Yu Ch'ien called. There was the gleam of lanterns borne by the servants. The brown woman raised herself from the floor. He placed the child in her hands. He said: "It is finished--and it is begun. Care for her."

Thus was born the daughter of Jean and Martin Meredith in the ancient Temple of the Foxes. Born in the heart of the Hour of the Fox, so called in those parts of China where the ancient beliefs still live because it is at the opposite pole of the Hour of the Horse, which animal at certain times and at certain places, has a magic against which the magic of the Fox may not prevail.

CHAPTER III

THE HOME OF HEAVENLY ANTICIPATIONS honored with its presence Peking, not yet at that time renamed Peiping. It was hidden in the heart of the Old City. The anticipations discussed there were usually the reverse of heavenly--or, if not, then dealing with highly unorthodox realms of beatitude.

But except for its patrons none ever knew what went on within its walls. There was never any leakage of secrets through those walls. Peculiarly ultimate information could be obtained at the Home of Heavenly Anticipations--so long as it did not pertain to its patrons.

It was, in fact, a clearing house for enterprises looked upon with a certain amount of disfavor even by many uncivilized countries: enterprises such as blackmail, larceny on the grand scale, smuggling, escapes, piracies, removal of obstacles by assassination and so on. Its abbots collected rich tithes from each successful operation in return for absolute protection from interruption, eavesdropping and spies, and for the expert and thoroughly trustworthy advices upon any point of any enterprise which needed to be cleared up before action.

Prospective members of the most exclusive of London's clubs were never scanned with such completeness as were applicants for the right to enter the Home of Heavenly Anticipations--and one had to be a rather complete scoundrel to win that right. But to those who sought such benefits as it offered, they were worth all the difficulty in securing them.

Charles Meredith sat in one of its rooms, three weeks to a night from the birth of Jean Meredith's baby. He was not a member, but it was the privilege of accredited patrons to entertain guests to whom secrecy was as desirable as to themselves--or who might prove refractory.

It was a doubtful privilege for these guests, although they were not aware of it, because it was always quite possible that they might never appear again in their usual haunts. In such event it was almost impossible to trace them back to the Home of Heavenly Anticipations. Always, on their way to it, they had been directed to leave their vehicle, coolie-carriage or what not at a certain point and to wait until another picked them up. Beyond that point they were never traced. Or if their bodies were later found, it

was always under such circumstances that no one could point a finger at the Home of Heavenly Anticipations, which was as expert on alibis for corpses as for crooks.

Although he knew nothing of this, Charles Meredith was uneasy. For one thing, he had a considerable sum of money in his pocket--a very considerable sum. To be explicit, fifty thousand dollars. For another thing, he had not the slightest idea of where he was.

He had dismissed his hotel coolie at a designated point, had been approached by another who gave the proper word of recognition, had been whisked through street after street, then through a narrow alley, then through a door opening into a winding passage, thence into a plain reception hall where a bowing Chinese had met him and led him to the room. He had seen no one, and he heard no sound. Under the circumstances, he appreciated privacy--but damn it, there was a limit! And where was Li-kong?

He got up and walked about nervously. It gave him some satisfaction to feel the automatic holstered under his left arm-pit. He was tall, rather rangy and his shoulders stooped a little. He had clear eyes whose grey stood out a bit startlingly from his dark face; a good forehead, a somewhat predatory beaked nose; his worst feature, his mouth, which hinted self-indulgence and cruelty. Seemingly an alert, capable American man of affairs, not at all one who would connive at the murder of his own brother.

He turned at the opening of the door. Li-kong came in. Li-kong was a graduate of an American college. His father had cherished hopes of a high diplomatic career, with his American training as part of its foundation. He had repaid it by learning in exhaustive detail the worst of American life. This, grafted to his natural qualifications, had given him high place in the Home of Heavenly Anticipations and among its patrons.

He was in the most formal of English evening dress, looked completely the person his father had hoped he would be instead of what he actually was--without principles, morals, mercy or compunction whatever.

Meredith's nervousness found vent in an irritable, "You've been a hell of a long time getting here, Likong!"

The eyes of the Chinese flickered, but he answered urbanely: "Bad news flies fast. Good news is slow. I am neither early nor late."

Meredith asked suspiciously: "What the hell do you mean by that?"

Li-kong said, eyes watchful: "Your honorable elder brother has ascended the dragon."

Meredith's grey eyes glittered. The cruelty stood out on his mouth, unmasked. Li-kong said before he could speak: "All with him, even his unworthy servants, ascended at the same time. All except--" He paused.

Meredith's body tightened, his head thrust forward. He asked in a thin voice: "Except?"

The eyes of the Chinese never left him. He said:

"When you rebuked me a moment ago for slowness, I answered that I was neither early nor late. I must therefore bear good news and bad--"

The American interrupted: "Damn you, Li-kong, who got away?"

The Chinese answered: "Your brother's wife."

Meredith's face whitened, then blackened with fury. He whispered: "Christ!"

He roared: "So you bungled it!" His hand twitched up to the gun under his arm-pit, then dropped. He asked: "Where is she?"

The Chinese must have seen that betraying movement, but he gave no sign. He answered: "She fled to the Temple of the Foxes--to your brother's old friend, the priest Yu Ch'ien."

The other snarled: "What were your bunglers about, to let her go? Why didn't they go after her?"

"They did go after her! Of what happened thereafter, you shall hear--when you have paid me my money, my friend."

"Paid you!" Meredith's fury mastered him at this. "With the bitch alive? I'll see you in hell before you get a cent from me."

The Chinese said calmly: "But since then she has also ascended the dragon in the footsteps of her lord. She died in childbirth."

"They both are dead--" Meredith sank into the chair, trembling like one from whom tremendous strain has lifted. "Both dead--"

The Chinese watched him, malicious anticipation in his eyes. "But the child--lived!" he said.

For a long minute the American sat motionless, looking at him. And now he did not lose control. He said coldly: "So you have been playing with me, have you? Well, now listen to me--you get nothing until the child has followed its father and mother. Nothing! And if it is in your mind to blackmail me, remember you can bring no charge against me without sending yourself to the executioner. Think over that, you leering yellow ape!"

The Chinese lighted a cigarette. He said mildly:

"Your brother is dead, according to plan. His wife is dead through that same plan, even though she did not die when the others did. There was nothing in the bargain concerning the child. And I do not think you could reach the child without me." He smiled. "Is it not said, of two brothers, he who thinks himself the invulnerable one--that is the fool?"

Meredith said nothing, eyes bleak on him. Li-kong went on: "Also, I have information to impart, advice to give--necessary to you if you determine to go for the child. As you must--if you want her. And finally--is it not written in the Yih King, the Book of Changes, that a man's mind should have many entrances but only one exit! In this house the saying is reversed. It has only one entrance but many exits--and the door-keeper of each one of them is death."

Again he paused, then said: "Think over that, you welching white brother-killer!"

The American quivered. He sprang up, reaching for his gun. Strong hands grasped his elbows, held him helpless. Li-kong sauntered to him, drew out the automatic, thrust it into his own pocket. The hands released Meredith. He looked behind him. Two Chinese stood there. One held a crimson bow-string, the other a double-edged short-sword.

"Two of the deaths that guard the exits." Li-kong's voice was courtesy itself. "You may have your choice. I recommend the sword--it is swifter."

Ruthless Meredith was, and no coward, but he recognized here a ruthlessness complete as his own. "You win," he said. "I'll pay."

"And now," smiled Li-kong.

Meredith drew out the bundle of notes and passed them to him. The Chinese counted them and nodded. He spoke to the two executioners and they withdrew. He said very seriously: "My friend, it is well for you I recognize that insults by a younger people have not the same force that they would have if spoken by one of my own race, so much older than yours. In the Yih King it is written that we must not be confused by similitude, that the superior man places not the same value upon the words of a child as he does upon those of a grown man, although the words be identical. It is well also for you that I feel a certain obligation. Not personally, but because an unconsidered factor has caused a seed sown in this house to bring forth a deformed blossom. It is," continued Li-kong, still very seriously, "a reflection upon its honor--"

He smiled at that, and said, "Or rather, its efficiency. I suggest, therefore, that we discuss the matter without heat or further recrimination of any kind."

Meredith said: "I am sorry I said what I did, Likong. It was childish temper. I apologize."

The Chinese bowed, but he did not take the hand the other extended. Nor did he recall his own words.

He said: "The child is at the Temple of the Foxes. In Kansu, it is an extremely sacred shrine. She is in charge of Yu Ch'ien, who is not only wise but powerful, and in addition was your honorable late brother's devoted friend. If Yu Ch'ien suspects, then you will have great difficulty in adding to your brother's and your sister-in-law's happiness in Heaven by restoring to them their daughter. You may assume that Yu Ch'ien does suspect--and knows."

Meredith asked incredulously: "Why should he suspect? How could he know?"

Li-kong tapped his cigarette thoughtfully before he answered: "The priest is very wise. Also, like myself, he has had the advantage of contact with your admirable civilization. The woman was with him for weeks, and so he must know who would benefit by the--ah, expungement of your revered relatives. He might think it highly suspicious that those responsible for the regrettable affair did not pursue the custom of holding the principals for ransom instead of--ah, expunging them on the spot. Naturally, he would ask himself why. Finally, Yu Ch'ien is locally reported to have sources of information not open to other men--I mean living men. The dead," observed Li-kong sardonically, "of course know everything."

Meredith said contemptuously: "What do you mean? Spiritism, divination--that rot?"

Li-kong considered pensively, answered at last: "No--not exactly that. Something closer, rather to the classical idea of communion with elemental intelligences, nature spirits, creatures surviving from an older world than man's--but still of earth. Something like the spirits that answered from the oaks of Dodona, or that spoke to the Sybil in the grotto of Cumae, or in more modern times appeared in, and instructed Joan of Arc from, the branches of the arbre fee, the fairy tree of Domremy."

Meredith laughed. "Good God! And this--from you!"

Li-kong said imperturbably: "This from me! I am--what I am. I believe in nothing. Yet I tell you that I would not go up those steps to the Temple of the Foxes for all the gold you could give me. Not--now!"

Meredith thought: He is trying to frighten me. The yellow dog is trying to keep me from the temple. Why? He spoke only the last word of the thought: "Why?"

The Chinese answered: "China is old. The ancient beliefs are still strong. There are, for example, the legends of the fox women. The fox women are nature spirits. Intelligences earthy but not human--akin to

those in Dodona's oaks, Cumae's grotto, Joan of Arc's fairy tree. Believed in--especially in Kansu. These--let us say spirits--have certain powers far exceeding the human. Bear with me while I tell you of a few of these powers. They can assume two earthly shapes only--that of a fox and that of a beautiful woman. There are fox men, too, but the weight of the legends are upon the women. Since for them time does not exist, they are mistresses of time. To those who come under their power, they can cause a day to seem like a thousand years, or a thousand years like a day. They can open the doors to other worlds--worlds of terror, worlds of delight. If such worlds are illusions, they do not seem so to those for whom they are opened. The fox women can make or mar journeys."

Meredith thought: Come, now we're getting down to it.

The Chinese went quietly on: "They can create other illusions. Phantoms, perhaps--but if so, phantoms whose blows maim or kill. They are capricious, bestowing good fortune or ill regardless of the virtue or the lack of it of the recipient. They are peculiarly favorable to women with child. They can, by invitation, enter a woman, passing through her breasts or beneath her finger nails. They can enter an unborn child, or rather a child about to be born. In such cases, the mother dies--nor is the manner of birth the normal one. They cannot oust the soul of the child, but they can dwell beside it, influencing it. Quaint fancies, my friend, in none of which I have belief. Yet because of them nothing could induce me to climb the steps to the Temple of the foxes."

Meredith thought: He's trying to frighten me away! What the hell does he think I am--to be frightened by such superstitious drivel? He said, in that thin voice with which he spoke when temper was mastering him:

"What's your game, Li-kong? Another double-cross? You're trying to tell me that if I were you, I wouldn't go to the temple for the brat. Why?"

The Chinese said: "My friend, I have played the game with you. I do not say that if I were you, I would not go. I say that if you were I, you would not. A quite different thing."

The other swung clenched fist down upon the table. "Don't tell me you expect me to take seriously that farrago of nonsense! You don't expect me to give up now because of a yellow--" He checked himself abruptly.

The Chinese completed the sentence politely: "Because of a yellow man's superstition! No, but let me point out a few rather disquieting things. The Temple of the Foxes is believed to be the home of five of these fox women. Five--spirits--who are sisters. Three messengers were sent me with the news of the ambush. The first should have reached me within three weeks after it happened. He has vanished. The second was despatched with other news a week later. He too vanished. But the third, bearing the news of the death of your brother's wife, the birth of the child, came as on the wings of the wind. Why the failure of the first two? Because someone desired to keep you in ignorance until after that birth? Who?"

"Again, no word has come from Kansu, except by this messenger, of the attack on your brother's party. This, my friend, places you in a dilemma. You cannot betray your knowledge of his death without subjecting yourself to questioning as to how that knowledge came to you. You cannot, therefore, send for the child. You must yourself go--upon some pretext. I think that whoever sped the third messenger on his way intends that you shall go--yourself. Why?"

Meredith struck the table again. "I'll go!"

"Third," continued Li-kong, "my messenger said that the woman who fled ran up the steps of the Temple of the Foxes. And that when they were almost upon her--a fox stood between her and them. And that fox changed into a woman who changed their leader into a mad dog. At which--they ran. So I think," said Likong meditatively, "would I have run!"

Meredith said nothing, but his hand beat steadily on the table and the grey eyes were furious.

"You are thinking," said the Chinese, "The yellow dogs! Of course they would run! Filled with rum or opium! Of course!"

It was precisely what he had been thinking, but Meredith made no answer.

"And finally," said Li-kong, "your brother's wife died when the child was born--"

"Because, I suppose, the fox bitch crawled into her!" jeered Meredith, and leaning back, whined thin, highpitched laughter.

The Chinese lost for a moment his calm, half arose, then dropped back. He said patiently: "If you go up the steps--ride a horse. Preferably an English horse that has hunted foxes."

He lighted another cigarette. "But that is superstition. Nevertheless, if you go, take two men with you as free from taint--as you are. I know two such men. One is a German, the other French. Bold men and hard men. Travel alone, the three of you, as far as you can. At all times keep as few Chinese with you as possible. When you go to the temple, go up the steps alone. Take no Chinese with you there." He said gravely: "I vouch for these two men. Better still, the Home of Heavenly Anticipations vouches for them. They will want money, of course."

Meredith asked: "How much?"

"I don't know. They're not cheap. Probably five thousand dollars at most."

Meredith thought: Here's what he's been leading up to. It's a trap!

Again it was as though Li-kong had read his thoughts. He said very deliberately: "Meredith, listen to me! I want nothing more from you nor through you. I have not spoken to these men. They do not know, nor will they know from me, anything of that transaction for which you have just paid. I am through with it. I am through with you! I do not like you. I hope never to see you again. Is that plain American talk?"

Meredith said, as deliberately: "I like it. Go on."

"All that they need know is that you are anxious about your brother. When in due time during your journey you discover that he and his wife are dead, and that there is a child, you will naturally want to bring that child back with you. If you are denied the child, and killing is necessary, they will kill. That is all. I will put you in touch with these two men. And I will see to it that none with whom I have relations embarrass you on your way to Kansu, nor on your way back--if you come back. Except for that obligation of which I have spoken, I would not do even this. I would not lift a finger to help you. After you leave this house, you shall be to me as though you never had been. I want nothing to do with Yu Ch'ien and those who go to the Temple of the Foxes. If we should meet again--never speak to me! Do not show you have known me! Never speak to me, never write to me, do not think of me. I am through with you! Is that clear?"

Meredith nodded, smiling. He thought: I was wrong about him wanting to keep me from the place. The yellow rat is frightened...he believes in his own bogies! America and everything else couldn't knock the superstition out of him!

The thought amused him. It gave him a contemptuous tolerance of Li-kong, a pleasant knowledge of superiority. He said, not bothering to keep the contempt from his voice: "Clearer than you know, Li-kong. Where do I meet your friends?"

"They can be at your hotel at one, if it suits you."

"It suits me. Their names?"

"They will tell you. They will bear credentials from me."

Li-kong arose. He stood beside the door, bowing courteously. Meredith passed through. They went along another passage and through a winding alley out into a street. It was not the same street from which he had entered. Nor did he recognize it. A coolie-car waited. Li-kong bowed him into it.

"May our shadows never touch again," said Li-kong ceremoniously. He added, for the first time menacingly: "For your health."

He turned and passed into the alley. The coolie broke into a swift trot, and away.

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS MID-AFTERNOON a month later that he rode out of the green glen and looked up the first steep flight of the ancient steps to the Temple of the Foxes. Riding beside him were von Brenner and Lascelles, the two bold and hard men Li-kong had recommended. They were all of that, but they were also discreet men. They had accepted without comment his explanation of seeking news of his brother, had been properly sympathetic and had asked him no embarrassing questions. Both could speak the Mandarin as well as several of the dialects. Lascelles knew Kansu, was even familiar with the locality in which was the Temple of the Foxes.

Meredith had thought it wise to make inquiries at various places through which he knew Martin had passed, and here the German and the Frenchman acted as his interpreters. When they reported that at these points his brother's party had been in excellent health, they did so with every outward evidence of belief that such tidings were welcome to him.

Either they were excellent actors or Li-kong had kept faith with him and told them nothing beyond what had been agreed. Confidence in the second possibility however had been somewhat disturbed shortly after entering Kansu. The Frenchman had said he thought, somewhat too casually, that if it was desirable to get to the temple without passing through any village within a day's march, he knew a way. He added that while undoubtedly the temple's priest would know they were coming, he would expect them to follow the usual route. Therefore, he could possibly be taken by surprise.

Meredith smelled a trap. To accept the suggestion was to admit that the temple had been the real object of his journey, the reason he had given a subterfuge, and the anxious inquiries he had made along the line of march a blind. He answered sharply that there was no reason for any surprise visit, that the priest Yu Ch'ien, a venerable scholar, was an old friend of his brother, and that if the party had reached him there was no further cause for anxiety. Why did Lascelles think he desired any secrecy in his search? The Frenchman replied politely that if he had known of such friendship the thought would not have occurred to him, of course.

As a matter of fact, Meredith felt no more fear of Yu Ch'ien than he did of Li-kong's fox woman. Whenever he thought of how the Chinese had tried to impress him with that yellow Mother Goose yarn, he felt a contemptuous amusement that more than compensated him for the humiliation of having been forced to pay the blood money. He had often listened to Martin extol Yu Ch'ien's wisdom and virtues, but that only proved what a complete impractical ass Martin had been...gone senile prematurely, in brain at least...that was plain enough when he married that gold-digger young enough to be his daughter...no longer the brother he had known...who could tell what he might have done next...some senility which

would have brought ruin to them all...a senile crazy brain in Martin's still sound body, that was all...if Martin had been suffering from some agonizing and incurable disease and had asked him to put him out of his misery, he would certainly have done so...well, what was the difference between that and what he had done? That the girl and her brat should also have to suffer was too bad...but it had been made necessary by Martin's own senility.

Thus he justified himself. At the same time there was no reason why he should take these two men into his confidence.

What he should do with the brat when he had it was not quite clear. It was only two months old--and it was a long journey back to Peking. There must be some woman taking care of it at the temple. He would arrange that she go with them to Peking. If some accident happened, or if the child caught something or other on the way back--that would not be his fault. Her proper place, obviously, was with her father's family. Not in a heathen temple back of nowhere in China. Nobody could blame him for wanting to bring her back...even if anything did happen to her.

But on second thought, not so good. He would have to take back proof that this child was theirs. Proof of birth. It would be better to bring her alive to Peking...even better, it might be, if it lived until he had taken it back to the States and the whole matter of trusteeship and guardianship had been legally adjusted. There was plenty of time. And he would have his half-million, and the increased percentage from the estate to tide him over the gap between now and until--something happened, and the whole estate would be his. He thought callously: Well, the brat is insured as far as Peking at any rate.

They had passed through a village that morning. The headman had met them, and in answer to the usual questioning, had given a complete account of the massacre, of Jean's escape, of her death later at the temple and of the child's birth. It was so complete, even to the dates, that he felt a stirring of faint suspicion. It was a little as though the story had been drilled into this man. And now and then he would call this one or that among the villagers for corroboration. But Charles had shown the proper shades of grief, and desire to punish the killers. And Brenner and Lascelles had exerted themselves to comfort him in orthodox fashion.

He had said at last: "The first thing to do is get the baby safely back to Peking. I can get capable white nurses there. I'll have to find a woman here to look after it until we reach Peking. I want to get the child to the States and in my wife's care as soon as I can. And I want to start the machinery going to punish my brother's murderers--although I realize that's a forlorn hope."

They had agreed with him that it was most desirable to get the child to his wife in quickest possible time, and that hope of punishing the killers was indeed a forlorn one.

And now he stood looking up the ancient steps at whose end was the child. He said: "You couldn't ride a horse up that, unless it was a circus horse. And these are not."

Lascelles smiled. "It is impossible to ride to the temple. There are steeper flights than this. And there is no trail or other road. We must walk."

Meredith said suspiciously: "You seem to know a lot about this place, Lascelles. Ever been to the temple?"

The Frenchman answered: "No, but I have talked to those who have."

Meredith grinned. "Li-kong told me to take a horse. He said the fox women were afraid of it."

Brenner laughed. "Die Fuchs-Damen! I haf always wanted to see one. Joost as I always wanted to see

one of those bowmen of Mons they haf spoken so highly of in the War. Yah! I would like to try a bullet on the bowmen, but I would haf other treatment for the fox women. Yah!"

Lascelles said noncommittally: "It's hard to get some things out of the mind of a Chinese."

Brenner said to Meredith: "There is one question I haf to ask. How far iss it that we go in getting this child? Suppose this priest thinks it better you do not haf it? How far iss it that we go to persuade him, hein?" He added meditatively: "The headman said that there are with the priest three women and four men." He said even more meditatively: "The headsman he was very full of detail. Yah--he knew a lot. I do not like that--quite."

Lascelles nodded, saying nothing, looking at Meredith interrogatively.

Meredith said: "I do not see for what reason or upon what grounds Yu Ch'ien can deny me the child. I am its uncle, its natural guardian. Its father, my brother so designated me in the event of his death. Well, he is dead. If the priest refuses to give it up peaceably I would certainly be justified in using force to secure it. If the priest were hurt--we would not be to blame. If his men attacked us and were hurt--we would be blameless. One way or another--I take the child."

Lascelles said somewhat grimly: "If it comes to fighting, we ride back along that way I told you of. We will go through no village within a day's journey from here. It will not be healthy for us in Kansu--the speed at which we must go will not be healthy for the child."

Meredith said: "I am sure we'll have no trouble with Yu Ch'ien."

They had brought a fourth horse with them, a sturdy beast with wide Chinese saddle such as a woman rides. They tethered the four horses and began to mount the steps. At first they talked, then their voices seemed to be absorbed in the silence, to grow thin. They stopped talking.

The tall pines watched them as they passed--the crouching shrubs watched them. They saw no one, heard nothing--but gradually they became as watchful as the pines and bushes, alert, hands gripping the butts of their pistols as though the touch gave them confidence. They came over the brow of the hill and the sweat was streaming from them as it streams from horses frightened by something they sense but can neither see nor hear.

It was as though they had passed out of some perilhaunted jungle into safety. They still said nothing to each other, but they straightened, drew deep breaths, and their hands fell from their pistols. They looked down upon the peacock-tiled roof of the Temple of the Foxes and upon its blue pool of peace. A man sat beside it on a stone seat. As they watched him, he arose and walked toward the temple. At each side of him went a pair of what seemed russet-red dogs. Suddenly they saw that these were not dogs, but foxes.

They came down over the brow of the hill to the rear of the temple. In its brown stone there was no door, only six high windows that seemed to watch them come. They saw no one. They skirted the temple and reached its front. The man they had seen at the pool stood there, as though awaiting them. The foxes were gone.

The three halted as one, involuntarily. Meredith had expected to see an old, old man--gentle, a little feeble, perhaps. The face he saw was old, no doubt of that--but the eyes were young and prodigiously alive. Large and black and liquid, they held his. He was clothed in a symbolized robe of silvery blue on whose breast in silver was a fox's head.

Meredith thought: What if he isn't what I expected! He shook his head impatiently, as though to get rid of

some numbness. He stepped forward, hand outstretched. He said: "I am Charles Meredith. You are Yu Ch'ien--my brother's friend--"

The priest said: "I have been expecting you, Charles Meredith. You already know what happened. The village headman mercifully took from me the burden of delivering to you the first blossom of sorrowful knowledge."

Meredith thought: How the devil did he know that?

The village is half a day away. We came swiftly, and no runner could have reached here before us.

The priest had taken his outstretched hand. He did not clasp it palm to palm, but held it across the top, thumb pressed to wrist. Meredith felt a curious tingling coolness dart from wrist to shoulder. The black eyes were looking deep into his, and he felt the same tingling coolness in his brain. His hand was released, the gaze withdrawn. He felt as though something had been withdrawn from his mind with it.

"And your friends--" Yu Ch'ien grasped von Brenner's hand in the same way, black eyes searching the German's. He turned to Lascelles. The French thrust his hands behind him, avoided the eyes. He bowed and said: "For me, it is too great honor, venerable father of wisdom."

For an instant Yu Ch'ien's gaze rested on him thoughtfully. He spoke to Meredith: "Of your brother and your brother's wife there is nothing more to be said. They have passed. You shall see the child."

Meredith answered bluntly: "I came to take her with me, Yu Ch'ien."

The priest said as though he had not heard: "Come into the temple and you shall see her."

He walked through the time-bitten pillars into the room where Jean Meredith had died. They followed him. It was oddly dark within the temple chamber. Meredith supposed that it was the transition from the sunny brightness. It was as though the chamber was filled with silent, watchful brown shadows. There was an altar of green stone on which were five ancient ramps of milky jade. They were circular, and in four of them candles burned, turning them into four small moons. The priest led them toward this altar. Not far from the altar was an immense vessel of bronze, like a baptismal font. Between altar and vessel was an old Chinese cradle, and nestled in its cushions was a baby. It was a girl child, fast asleep, one little dimpled fist doubled up to its mouth. The priest walked to the opposite side of the cradle.

He said softly: "Your brother's daughter, Charles Meredith. Bend over. I desire to show you somethinglet your friends look too."

The three bent over the cradle. The priest gently opened the child's swathings. Upon its breast, over its heart, was a small scarlet birth-mark shaped like a candle flame wavering in the wind. Lascelles lifted his hand, finger pointing, but before he could speak, the priest had caught his wrist. He looked into the Frenchman's eyes. He said sternly: "Do not waken her."

The Frenchman stared at him for a moment, then said through stiff lips: "You devil!"

The priest dropped his wrist. He said to Meredith, tranquilly: "I show you the birth-mark so you may know the child when you see her again. It will be long, Charles Meredith, before you do see her again."

A quick rage swept Meredith but before he succumbed to it he found time to wonder at its fury. He whispered: "Cover him, von Brenner! Throttle him, Lascelles!"

He bent down to lift the baby from the cradle. He stiffened, hands clutching at empty air. The baby and cradle were gone. He looked up. The priest was gone.

Where Yu Ch'ien had stood was a row of archers, a dozen of them. The light from the four lanterns shone shadedly upon them. They were in archaic mail, black lacquered helmets on their heads; under their visors yellow slanted eyes gleamed from impassive faces. Their bows were stretched, strings ready to loose, the triangular arrow heads at point like snakes poised to spring. He looked at them stupidly. Where had they come from? At the head of the line was a giant all of seven feet tall, old, with a face as though made of gnarled pear-wood. It was his arrow that pointed to Meredith's heart. The others---

He sprang back--back between von Brenner and Lascelles. They stood, glaring unbelievably as he had at that line of bowmen. He saw the German lift his pistol, heard him say thickly: "The bowmen of Mons--" heard Lascelles cry: "Drop it, you fool!" Heard the twang of a bow, the hiss of an arrow and saw an arrow pierce the German's wrist and saw the pistol fall to the temple floor.

Lascelles cried: "Don't move, Meredith!" The Frenchman's automatic rang upon the temple floor.

He heard a command--in the voice of Yu Ch'ien. The archers moved forward, not touching the three, but menacing them with their arrows. The three moved back.

Abruptly, beneath the altar, in the light of the four lanterns, he saw the cradle and the child within it, still asleep.

And beside the cradle, Yu Ch'ien.

The priest beckoned him. The line of archers opened as he walked forward. Yu Ch'ien looked at him with unfathomable eyes. He said in the same tranquil tones, utterly without anger or reproach:

"I know the truth. You think I could not prove that truth? You are right. I could not--in an earthly court. And you fear no other. But listen well--you have good reason to fear me! Some day your brother's child will be sent to you. Until she comes, look after her interests well and try in no manner directly or indirectly to injure her. You will have the money your brother left you. You will have your interest in her estate. You will have at least seven years before she comes. Use those years well, Charles Meredith--it is not impossible that you may build up much merit which will mitigate, even if it cannot cancel, your debt of wickedness. But this I tell you--do not try to regain this child before she is sent to you, nor attempt to molest her. After she comes to you--the matter is in other hands than mine. Do you understand me, Charles Meredith?"

He heard himself say: "I understand you. It shall be as you say."

Yu Ch'ien thrust his hand into his robe, drew out a package. He said: "Here are written the circumstances of your brother's death, his wife's death and the birth of the child. They are attested by me, and by witnesses of mine. I am well known far beyond the limits of this, my temple. My signature will be sufficient to prove the authenticity of the statements. I have given my reasons why I think it useless to attempt to bring the actual murderers of your brother and his party to justice. I have said that their leader was caught and executed. He was! My real reason for acting as I am may not be known by you. Now pick up those useless weapons of yours--useless at least here--take these papers and go!"

Meredith took the documents. He picked up the guns. He turned and walked stiffly through the bowmen to where von Brenner and Lascelles stood close to the temple doors, under the arrows of the bowmen. They mounted the hill and set their feet upon the ancient road.

Silent, like men half-awake, they passed through the lines of the watchful pines and at last into the glen where their horses stood tethered---

There was an oath from the German. He was moving the wrist gingerly. And suddenly all three were like

men who had just awakened. Von Brenner cried: "The arrow! I felt it--I saw it! But there iss no arrow and no mark. And my hand iss good as ever."

Lascelles said very quietly: "There was no arrow, von Brenner. There were no bowmen. Nevertheless, let us move from here quickly."

Meredith said: "But I saw the arrow strike. I saw the archers."

"When Yu Ch'ien gripped our wrists he gripped our minds," answered Lascelles. "If we had not believed in the reality of the bowmen--we would not have seen them. The arrow could not have hurt you, von Brenner. But the priest had trapped us. We had to believe in their reality." He untied his horse. He turned to Meredith, foot on stirrup: "Did Yu Ch'ien threaten you?"

Meredith answered with a touch of grim humor:

"Yes--but he gave me seven years for the threats to take effect."

Lascelles said: "Good. Then you and I, von Brenner, get back to Peking. We'll spend the night at that village of the too well informed headman--go back by the open road. But ride fast."

He gave the horse his knee and raced away. The other two followed. The horse with the wide Chinese saddle placidly watched them go.

Two hours after dusk they came to the village. The headman was courteous, provided them with food and shelter, but no longer was communicative. Meredith was quiet. Before they rolled into their blankets he said to Lascelles: "When the priest grasped your hand you were about to say something--something about that birth-mark on the child's breast. What was it?"

Lascelles said: "I was about to say that it was the Symbol of the fox women."

Meredith said: "Don't tell me you believe in that damned nonsense!"

Lascelles answered: "I'm not telling you anything, except that the mark was the symbol of the fox women."

Von Brenner said: "I've seen some strange things in this damned China and elsewhere, Pierre. But neffer an arrow that pierced a man's wrist and hung there quivering--and then was gone. But the wrist dead--as mine wass."

Lascelles said: "Listen, Franz. This priest is a great man. What he did to us I have seen sorcerers, so-called, do to others in Tibet and in India. But never with such completeness, such clarity. The archers came from the mind of the priest into our minds--yes, that I know. But I tell you, Franz, that if you had believed that arrow had pierced your heart--your heart would not be alive as your wrist is! I tell you again--he is a great man, that priest."

Meredith said: "But--"

Lascelles said: "For Christ's sake, man, is it impossible for you to learn!" He rolled himself in his blankets. Went to sleep.

Meredith lay awake, thinking, for long. He thought;

Yu Ch'ien doesn't know a damned thing. If he did--why would he promise me the child? He knows he can't prove a thing. He thought: He thinks he can frighten me so that when the child comes of age she'll

get what's coming to her...And he thought: Lascelles is as crazy as Li-kong. Those archers were hidden there all the time. They were real, all right. Or, if it was a matter of hypnotism, I'd like to see myself believe in them in New York! He laughed.

It was a damned good arrangement, he concluded. Probably the priest wouldn't send the brat back to him for ten years. But in the meantime--well, he'd like to see that file of archers in one of the Bronx night clubs! It was a good arrangement--for him. The priest was as senile as Martin...

THE END