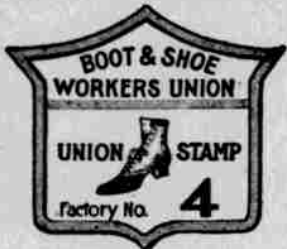


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The Seventh Gate

A Story of the Chinese
 Forbidden City.

By CLARISSA MACKIE

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 Association.

Owen Ryder left the train at the ter-
 minus several miles outside the walls
 of Peking and covered the remaining
 distance toward the city gate on the
 back of a donkey.

As he approached the seventh gate
 he paused for an instant. He had
 come on a journey of thousands of
 miles to accomplish a mission, and now
 that the object of his search was al-
 most within his grasp he hesitated.

Fear had no part in his hesitation.
 He was comparatively safe in the dis-
 guise afforded by his Chinese dress—
 as safe as any native Chinese who
 wished to gain admission to the For-
 bidden City.

Then, with quick indrawn breath, he
 moved into the deeper shadow of the
 gate. As his hands touched the bronze
 doors they swung softly inward and
 engulfed him.

A dark shadow loomed at his side
 and, without a sound, guided him close
 against the inner wall in a curving
 line. They came to an abrupt stop in
 a grove of trees whose tops rustled
 high over their heads. Before them
 were the dim outline and bulky mass
 of some huge building.

At last a door closed softly behind
 them, the hands were removed from
 Ryder's lips and arm, and presently a
 light twinkled out of the gloom.

The American turned to look at his
 companion, who had withdrawn the
 cover from a small bronze lantern and
 stood revealed in its dim light.

Ryder stared and stared again at the
 tall, spare figure that confronted him.
 This was no Chinese—this man with
 deep sunken blue eyes and wisps of
 fair hair sticking out from under the
 cue bound about his forehead. Owen
 Ryder's wondering gaze traveled over
 the yellowed skin drawn tightly over
 the protruding cheek bones, down to
 the handsome nose and bitter, curling
 lips, down to the common blue cotton
 Chinese dress and then up again with
 puzzled eyes to study the face with
 something lacking—something—what?

The man laughed silently as he lifted
 his bony hands to each side of his
 head. "You miss these appendages,
 my friend. I have been cropped, you
 see." His voice was low and vibrant
 with some suppressed emotion.

Ryder gasped. "Your ears—my God!"
 He felt within his blouse for the com-
 fortable reassurance of his revolver,
 and his fingers curled about the butt
 lovingly.

"Your ears next, my friend, and the
 ears of all who pass through the sev-
 enth gate inward," said the stranger,
 with assumed lightness. He turned
 and pointed to the wall behind him,
 and Ryder gasped again to see a line
 of dark figures stretched along the
 floor.

"Earless freaks," said the tall stran-
 ger, with sudden dreariness in his
 mocking tone. "Sit down on the floor,
 man, and tell your story—nay, let me
 preface it for you and for me and the
 rest of us—white men!"

"Go ahead," said Ryder.

"You are an artist of some sort. You
 have learned that these people have
 recovered their lost art of producing
 Klastin porcelain, that rare painting
 of invisible flowers, fishes or other
 symbols on the outside of porcelain
 vessels, paintings that are only re-
 vealed when the vessel is filled with liquor
 of some sort. The discoverer of this
 lost and precious art is confined to his
 workshop in the palace here. The re-
 tention of the secret means the addi-
 tion of large sums of money to this
 country; hence they guard it carefully.
 You were put on to the secret, you
 have come to spy it out, you have
 reached as far as—"

"I had a model!" began Ryder eager-
 ly, when the other man's low laugh
 cut him short.

"What is your name?"

"I am Edward Stone, an Englishman.
 I had a model, too, and so did each
 of these five other poor earless devils.
 It was the same model. One by one
 she sent us here as she sent you. It
 could have been no one else but Lena
 Shultz."

"It was Lena Shultz," returned Ry-
 der dully.

"I knew it. The man who discov-
 ered the lost art is not a native. To
 what country he belongs I do not
 know. I do know that he made the
 discovery and was captured with his
 belongings and is confined within three
 feet of where we now are. All day he
 works in the underground cell perfect-
 ing his discovery, for in spite of the
 most violent threats he will not im-
 part the secret to another soul or work
 in another man's presence."

"But why did that woman send us
 here—on a wild goose chase?" mut-
 tered Ryder after a silence.

"Yonder poor devil is her husband.
 She hopes with the aid of other white
 men to help him escape from here. I
 was the first to come. I arrived at 9
 in the evening. Now it is my duty to
 open the gate at 9 every evening in
 the hope of catching other would be
 thieves. 'Set a thief to catch a thief,'
 you know!" He uttered a hard little
 laugh.

"I suppose that's what we are,"
 agreed Ryder.

"That's so."

"How long have you been here?"

"Four years."

"My God! How do you live?"

"Don't live exist."

"Any hope of escape?"

"None whatever."

"The imperial government"—began
 Ryder suddenly, when the Englishman
 interrupted.

"The imperial government knows
 nothing about the matter. The whole
 rascally affair is in the hands of a
 clique of highborn scoundrels. Re-
 solve to make yourself as comfortable
 as possible under the circumstances—
 resign yourself to losing your ears if
 you ever should escape one can buy
 lovely pink rubber ones, I fancy, and
 hope for a change of rulers. Nothing
 else will cause excitement enough to
 have our existence forgotten. Good
 night!"

Stone calmly stretched himself on
 the floor and went to sleep. Ryder sat
 and brooded at the bronze lantern
 flickering in the distance. His hand
 still caressed the butt of his revolver,
 but with less confidence.

New York seemed many thousands
 of miles away tonight—New York and
 alluring Lena Shultz. He cursed her
 under his breath and wondered how
 many more men she would throw as
 bait into that hidden city in the hope
 that one or all of them might aid in
 the escape of her husband.

There was an audible murmur of
 sound without the thick walls, pierced
 by sharp staccato cries. The thud of
 many pounding feet sounded in the
 courtyards above their heads, and in
 an instant the six sleeping prisoners
 were awake and on the alert. The
 Latins gabbled French to one another,
 while Stone and Ryder drew near to
 an iron grating in the stone roof.

The American could make nothing
 of the strange sounds, but the Eng-
 lishman's face lighted with sudden ex-
 citement.

"By Jove," he whispered exultant-
 ly, "you've brought good luck after
 all, Ryder! Something extraordinary
 has happened, from what I can hear—
 a change of government indeed! Two
 deaths and chaos everywhere. Time
 for us to make a move, and disguises
 are in order."

He swooped to a dark corner and
 pried up a portion of the stone flag-
 ging. He brought into view a mass of
 silk and satin. He threw rich gar-
 ments to each of his fellow prisoners,
 and without a word they slipped into
 the voluminous folds.

"Doubly a thief," muttered Stone as
 he surveyed his companions. Then he
 caught up one remaining robe and
 thrust it under his arm. "See if we
 can release Lena's husband, poor
 devil! We owe her a grudge, sure
 enough, but white men must stand by
 one another!"

With the air of one who had studied
 his ground and was well versed in his
 undertaking, he unfastened the oaken
 door and by the guiding sound of his
 slipping, padding feet the six followed
 him into the outer darkness of corri-
 dors. They twisted and turned and
 doubled, and at last Stone paused be-
 fore another door.

"I don't know just how to get in-
 side," he admitted in a low tone. But
 the pressure of his hand on the planks
 pushed the door inward and revealed
 to their shocked senses a scene of car-
 nage indeed. With the details omit-
 ted, they realized that Lena's husband
 was dead, with his precious secret still
 a mystery behind his horribly grinning
 lips.

"The syndicate has done well in-
 deed," said Stone, turning away. Sil-
 ently they fled through the passages
 until they reached the foot of the
 grass grown steps where Ryder had
 left the outside world behind. "It is
 here where the guard is set. Look for
 danger, friends," whispered the Eng-
 lishman.

The shadows were uninhabited.
 They slipped up into the grove of
 whispering trees and followed the
 curve of the shining wall around to
 the seventh gate.

"Once outside!" muttered Stone fev-
 erishly.

"Once outside!" each man repeated
 in his own tongue.

In the distance were muffled cries
 and excited murmurings. Around the
 seventh gate all was still—ominously
 still.

The seven were pressed against the
 bronze gate, and Stone was fumbling
 with the complicated lock. There was
 a rushing sound behind them, and they
 turned their heads.

A file of soldiers was running to-
 ward them, and their short swords
 were raised in deadly menace. Stone
 pulled the door open and dashed forth
 with his companions into pitchy black-
 ness. They crashed into a sedan chair
 just entering the gateway. A wom-
 an's scream pierced the darkness, and
 from the tower overhead the watch-
 man thrust his lantern.

A white face appeared for a brief
 instant between the parted curtains of
 the chair.

"Lena Shultz!" bellowed Ryder ex-
 citedly.

With one accord the seven victims of
 Lena Shultz ignored the oncoming sol-
 diers, and, shouldering the bearers
 aside, they grasped the poles of the
 chair and carried the shrieking woman
 away from the seventh gate—a way
 from the Forbidden City beyond the
 outer darkness to the lighted consulate
 buildings—to safety for all.

The next day Ryder and Stone left
 for the nearest treaty port. "A fifth
 story studio and paint pots for the rest
 of my life. I'll take my foreign travel
 book fashion hereafter," said Ryder
 sheepishly to his companion as they
 whirled along the railway. "What's
 your first wish, Stone?"

The Englishman touched a matted
 wig which hung well down over the
 lapel of his coat.

"Pink rubber ears," he said sol-
 emnly.

And neither laughed.



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