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SALE BILLS

THE BEST AT THE FRONTIER

A Strange Case

The Artist and the Pictures of Mystery

By CARROL H. PIERCE
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I am an artist. Being in poor health my doctor ordered me abroad, and I went to Florence, Italy.

I rented rooms of a widow and her daughter, of the name of Micele. They occupied the top floor of a building on the river Arno. I used a front room for a studio and a rear room for a bedroom. The mother was a middle aged woman, the daughter about twenty-five. Their ancestors had been well off, but their estate had melted away, and Senora Micele and her daughter got on with difficulty. Bianca, the daughter, was an artist, but an indifferent one.

Nevertheless there was something remarkable about Bianca Micele. She was neither pretty nor homely. The eyes of the Italians are handsome, but Senorina Micele's eyes were more than handsome; they were, so to speak, compelling. That is, when she looked out of them at me I felt a strange force compelling me to do her bidding. Not that there was apparent exercise of will. She was gentleness itself. The power she exercised was rather persuasive than forceful.

Not long after I arrived in Florence I fell ill and did not leave my bed for weeks. Senora Micele and her daughter both nursed me.

A portion of the time I was in either a stupor or delirium, I don't know which. At such times I was very weak and on coming to myself usually felt as if I had been doing exhaustive work, though I had been in my bed all the while, where it would not have been possible for me to do any work even if I had been mentally capable.

My illness occurred during the winter, and when the spring came on and the weather began to warm up Senora Micele used to put me in an easy chair and wheel me out on to one of those little balconies common in Florence houses. We were on the Arno embankment (the Lung Arno, they call it there), in sight of the green hills that surround the city. Indeed, from my balcony I could see some six or seven miles distant the heights on which Fiosole, the original Florentine settlement, was made. During three more months I spent much of the day on this balcony in fancy painting pictures of the scenes spread out before me. One of these was the undulating plain beyond the city's edge and the heights of Fiosole beyond the plain. There is a big clock tower at Fiosole which it seemed to me would make an attractive feature in my imaginary picture and I spent hours working it in. Another view I dreamed of was the Arno, directly beneath me, winding under its arched bridges toward the south, and other nearer and consequently greener hills. There is something in the atmosphere of Italy to intensify the color of a landscape, and on such days I delighted in the imaginative painting I could not do in reality. But I always noticed that such days instead of giving me strength drew upon what I had.

Fortunately I recovered before the hot weather set in and after convalescing in the invigorating climate of the Swiss Alps went to Paris, where I remained some time.

Strolling one day down one of the Parisian boulevards, I stepped into a picture shop. The dealer, fancying to make a customer of me, advanced and questioned me as to what I was looking for. It occurred to me to ask for one of my own pictures, not that I expected to find one, but that to ask for the work of any special artist would make it appear that I was not looking at his wares with no intention of buying.

"Have you anything of Adrian Giles?" I asked.

"Giles, the American?"

"Yes."

"Certainly. I have a very remarkable piece of his work. Come this way."

He led me to one of his display rooms and up to a picture that had evidently been hung with considerable care. The subject was certainly familiar to me, for it was the plain I had overlooked at Florence with the hills and Fiosole in the distance. And as I stood looking at it I recognized not only the identical scene I had painted in my day dreams, but my individual style. Quickly bending to the lower left hand corner, a cap was put upon my astonishment by seeing my own name.

I caught with both hands at the rail that extended around the room to guard the pictures. Here was a view I had no remembrance of presenting, but which I must have painted. It was some time before I recovered sufficient quantity to further examine the painting, but when I did so I saw at once that for the first time in my life I had portrayed a scene exactly as I saw it. What I mean is that it possessed all the reality and beauty with which my imagination had endowed it.

"Where did you get it?" I stammered.

"From a dealer whom I never saw before."

"How do you know it is a genuine Giles?"

"I know it because I have seen several of the artist's pictures. One other I tried to buy, but failed to make a deal, is now displayed in a shop in the Boulevard des Italiens. You may see it there. There is the same unmistakable individuality about it as in this."

"What is the subject?"

"It is also a Florentine scene, called 'Up the Arno.' It takes in the river, with the hills beyond. It, too, is a great picture."

My knees began to knock together. My jaws chattered, but not sufficiently to prevent my asking, "What do you ask for this picture?"

"Twenty thousand francs."

"Great heavens! I had never received the half of that for a picture. I looked at the man so astonished that he hastened to say: 'My profit will be but 500 francs. I paid 19,500 francs for it.'"

Taking the number of the shop where he said the other picture was to be seen, I staggered out of the store and was soon before the picture I had also created in dreams. It, too, far exceeded any work I had ever done. The dealer told me he had paid 27,000 francs for it.

Fortunately I occupied rooms with an American friend in the Quartier Latin and rushed home to tell him that I had discovered something which if not explained would drive me crazy. He listened to my story, but I could see by his expression that he, too, feared something had occurred to disturb my mental balance. He would express no opinion till he had seen the paintings, and as I could not remain quiet I insisted on his going with me at once for the purpose. He did so, and, being familiar with my work, he pronounced the pictures mine, though they were far beyond any of my work he had ever seen.

On our way back to our rooms neither he nor I said anything about the strange occurrence, but when we reached them he sat down before me. It a pipe and said:

"While you were ill in Florence and out of your head you undoubtedly painted those pictures, not knowing what you were doing; consequently you retained no remembrance of them."

"But I wasn't out of my head when I was wrapped in the views given in the pictures. Besides, how could I have done the work without the Miceles knowing it? And, knowing it, they would have called my attention to it."

My friend pondered awhile, blowing at the same time clouds of smoke, and finally said:

"Whatever you have been physically, I'm sure you are all right now. But if you wish an explanation go back to Florence, see the people you boarded with and get it from them."

Acting on his advice, I started that evening. On the way I had time to think over the matter of my investigation and decided to approach the Miceles without being known to them. On arrival I asked about them and learned that they had been left a legacy of some fifty thousand francs. This at once assured me that they had received the amount paid for my pictures. One morning I rang their bell. Bianca answered the summons and, seeing me at the door, turned pale.

Going in, I asked her to call her mother and told both of my experience in Paris. At first they assumed to be as much surprised as I; but, seeing that I was not to be deceived, Senora Micele finally began a confession which the senorina finished.

"We did not suppose that you would ever happen to see your pictures," said the former.

"Well, tell me where they came from," I asked her. She looked at her daughter.

"I can only tell you," said Bianca, "that I painted them while you were sitting out in your chair on the balcony—how I know not. All I do know is that it seemed to me that it was your brain working with my hand."

I questioned her and cross questioned her, eliciting nothing further except that she had discovered some time before meeting me that she possessed some strange power of the order commonly called clairvoyant. My own interpretation of the incident was that, not being able to do good work herself, she had exercised this power over me to utilize my ability. Since she had painted the pictures herself the only fraud involved was her placing my name on them. She did this not realizing the pecuniary value of the pictures themselves and supposed she could not sell them without a name to them. She and her mother were tempted chiefly because they were financially in desperate straits. They had sold the paintings through a friend who appreciated their worth and paid them all they brought except a bare commission. I told them that they were welcome to all they had received for the paintings. The sole interest I took in the matter was a curiosity to know how the work had been executed.

Every year brings to light new evidence to show that there are subtle forces acting psychically within us that we do not understand. I believe that just as surely as the invention of wireless telegraphy will come an explanation of how Bianca Micele united my artistic ability with her own personality and of the union made a far better work of art than I could have produced by myself. It is possible that the advantage came merely through a certain suppleness in her wrist or in some other mechanical feature that was superior to mine, thus enabling me to attain an ideal that I had never been able to attain before with my less perfect member. But this is a mere hypothetical exposition of my own, unsupported by proof.

The Japanese Umbrella

A Chinese Episode and Its Horrible Effect

By CLARISSA MACKIE

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A whole year passed after Nelson's return from Asia before he found himself again treading an oriental street and rubbing elbows with slant eyed, blue bloused Chinese. His present position in the custom house made it necessary that he should visit a well known silk importer, whose place of business lay in the heart of San Francisco's reconstructed Chinatown.

Jay Nelson had been glad enough to eliminate all memory of his last year in China. There had been one horrible incident from which he had fled, but whose shadow had lurked in the background of his daily life since his return to America. In broad daylight he had laughed at the fears that pursued his first sleepless, fear haunted nights. After awhile the fear gave place to a sense of security fostered by the practical workaday happenings of his busy life.

Today, however, as he passed along Dupont street and turned into a narrow thoroughfare there burst upon him the significant fact that this part of a great city was but a fragment of the old eastern world after all.

He had to pause once or twice and inquire his way, for the house of the importer was set in the heart of the web of streets and alleys. Then when his goal lay but a few yards ahead there sprang into sudden view, bobbing along in the crowd before him, a certain green and gold paper parasol, the meaning of which was all too clear to Jay Nelson. He had a vague realization that this emblem of an old horror might have been evolved from his own morbid fancy.

He pressed forward, eager to stretch forth his hand and prove that the Japanese umbrella was a thing of air, was an optical illusion. But always it danced before him like a will-o'-the-wisp, now showing a glint of gold and green and then melting into a dozen illusive tints.

Where it went there he too must follow until he could prove by actual contact with its surface that it was a creation of his fancy and not the dreaded emblem of the White Brotherhood.

It drew him on down into the very bowels of the earth.

The paper umbrella collapsed and was cast aside, while the bearer turned to confront Nelson. Then the latter awoke from his trance-like state and stared first at the strange face that confronted him, then about the small dungeon-like room, empty of furniture and reeking with foul odors and lighted by a single swinging oil lamp. Nelson's gaze came back to the face of the Chinese, and he shivered slightly, for the face was that of a member of the dreaded order—the sign was written on the man's brow.

Instantly Nelson whipped off his coat, holding it before him as a shield and backed to the stairway leading upward.

"Hold a moment," said the Chinese in the Cantonese dialect; "I am not alone."

"Who else?" demanded Nelson sharply in the same tongue.

"The brotherhood—at each stair head they await your coming if you contemplate flight," returned the Chinese imperturbably.

"What do you want with me?"

"Command of the big brother that you be brought before him for trial."

"He came on from Hongkong to seek me?"

The Chinese cackled shrilly. Then he spat contemptuously. "The brotherhood is everywhere, Captain Leeson—wherever there are offenders there also will be found a tribunal of the brotherhood."

"Why do you call me by Captain Leeson's name?" questioned Nelson warily.

"Because you are he."

"Suppose I am not?"

"You are!" asserted the man roughly. "The brotherhood does not make mistakes."

"You blunder this time. I am Nelson."

The other laughed derisively. "I was told you would claim that name. Nelson died that night."

"Ah," cried Nelson suddenly, "you are the big brother! This is the tribunal. You are alone; you thought to fool me; see you later, Tai Lao!" He started to leap up the stairs and then stopped short.

Tai Lao made no move to arrest his flight. He merely folded his long claw tipped fingers into either capacious sleeve and smiled widely.

It was this smile that halted Nelson's departure, the smile and a certain hissing whisper that sang down the stairway and bore warning on its breath.

Again he turned to the Chinese. "Have it over with—this court of yours! Be quick, for I have business to attend to—matters of importance."

"Very good, Captain Leeson," commented the man called Tai Lao. "Follow me."

He led the way to a shadowy corner and pushed open a door into another dimly lighted room. At a long table sat seven men, three on either side and one at the end. At the farther end of the table there stood a wide armed empty chair. Except for a low

table lamp above the table the room was devoid of other furnishing.

"Captain Leeson," he announced in a low voice, "on trial for betraying secrets of the White Brothers."

"Captain Leeson died, as you all know," said Nelson sternly. "I saw him die, killed by your orders. He died in the street of—"

"Silence!" menaced the leader. "He claims to be Nelson, the one who died that night."

The seven nodded in unison, but did not remove their gaze from Nelson's angry face.

He kept silence now, briefly reviewing the strange events that had snatched him from the busy streets of the city into as dismal a den of murderers as one might hope to find along the water front of any Chinese city.

Before his eyes there flashed a picture of his last year in China. Then he had been in the diplomatic service of his country. Leeson, his friend, an Englishman in the British employ at Hongkong—inspector of health or something of that sort—had interested Nelson in his establishment of a leper colony down in Anam.

It was Leeson's ambition to clean out the lepers hidden in the city, to root them out from their places of concealment and transport them to the colony where preparations had been made for their segregation, where their cases should be studied and modern methods be employed.

It happened that the afflicted ones looked on the idea of banishment with distaste. They cared little to be herded together in a foreign province far from friends and familiar scenes. They cared nothing whatever for the benefits that might accrue to posterity through their segregation.

Leeson's efforts met with little success, and he brought the law to his aid. Thus he gained permission to capture the afflicted ones, and so his colony prospered for awhile. Then there was formed against him the society of the White Brothers, created to protect the lepers scattered throughout the city from Leeson's agents. Each one bore some mark of the disease, and they had some other emblem by which they might be known to each other if the mark of the disease was not plain enough. And this emblem was the green and gold paper umbrella, with its snaky twisting golden dragon coiling in and out of the green painted bamboo shoots.

Nelson remembered the first time he had seen them—that night of Leeson's carefully planned expedition into a suspected quarter. It was at night, and red lanterns had lighted the street down its crooked length. Suddenly there had burst upon them and the three agents who accompanied Leeson a hideous babel of cracked voices; a horrible spectacle of ghastly faces; a leprous mob that leered and jeered at them; that drove them point by point toward the end of the street of lepers; a yelling crowd that received the bullets from their revolvers and died noisily; a filthy crew that tried to touch them, that longed to render them as loathsome as itself.

Leeson had been killed, and Nelson tried to forget the sight as the rest of them got away. The next day he led a party back to the street, but it was deserted. Even poor Leeson's body had disappeared. After this outbreak the matter went under the supervision of a large medical corps, and the colony at Anam was augmented by several hundred cases. Nelson resigned from the service and went home, sickened of the whole dubious web of oriental life, thankful that he had escaped contact—that he was clean.

Now they had found him out they would take their revenge for his betrayal of their outbreak. It pleased them to call him by Leeson's name. As Leeson he would probably die in this hole in the ground under San Francisco.

Nelson determined to force some immediate action from the men who had sprung up in this faraway city to call him to account for his setting the hounds of law upon their trail. All his hideous dreams of the past year seemed to have been realized in the strange events of this day that would undoubtedly be his last on earth.

It had been a strange day, and even now, face to face with death—for the presence of these White Brothers meant nothing less—he seemed to be moving in a dream more frightful than anything his sleeping mind had conceived.

"Fire ahead," he said recklessly; "I'm not afraid of you. Come on, every devil's imp of you!" He flashed out the revolver he always carried just as they arose in a body and came at him, a ghastly company with stretching, clawing fingers and fiendish eyes.

Then Jay Nelson awoke. He sat up in bed, his brow dripping sweat and his heart pounding with excitement, for once more he had dreamed of the Japanese umbrella and the horrible band whose emblem it was. This was the worst dream of all, and he murmured devout thanks that it had been a dream.

Sitting there with the morning sunshine streaming into the room and a fresh breeze from the bay ruffling his hair, Nelson saw the early newspaper slid under his door. Eager to be in touch with the commonplaces of everyday life, he fetched it and read the headlines. After awhile, in a corner of the sheet, he read that the Hongkong authorities were satisfied that they had rid that city of its lepers. The White Brotherhood had been broken up, and most of its members were in Anam colony. The leader, Tai Lao, was dead. Captain Leeson's death had been avenged.

Jay Nelson went forth that morning a care free man to interview the silk importer in Chinatown. At last he was emancipated from fear. He would dream no more.