

THE ADVENTURE OF THE VACANT HOUSE.

By EARL ASHLEY WALCOTT.

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Ah Kim was a coward with the curiosity of a magpie. Both these things he knew, for he had been told them often by the mouth of his friend, the shrewd Wong Chee, and his inner consciousness assured him that Wong Chee spoke the truth. It was due to both that he had the adventure of devil's night.

It happened thus: On the night of the adventure he stood in the dark doorway, two houses from the corner of Pacific street, on the edge of Chinatown in the city of San Francisco, and it was here that he saw a Chinese pass across the way with a sack upon his shoulder. Now there was nothing about this to attract his attention had not the bearer of the sack stopped, looked cautiously about him, and then as cautiously opened the door of the third house from the corner that bore the "To Let" sign of the white agents. This was remarkable enough, for no man takes the fourth hour of the night to examine a house that he would rent. So Ah Kim speculated as to the matter, and had but reached the conclusion that it was none of his business when he observed the sack upon his shoulder, and after the same precaution to see if he were watched, open another Chinese saunter along, also with a sack on his shoulder and disappear in the darkness.

Now Ah Kim, not being bright of mind, was unable to think that this might mean, and after a study decided that it was a case to lay before his friend, the shrewd Wong Chee. He was therefore about to move from the doorway to put this idea into execution when he observed a third Chinese to come along, also with a sack upon his shoulder, and after the same precautions to enter the same house.

Ah Kim at this was partly in fear, for if the three sack-bearers thought it so important that they should not be observed they might think it more important to attend to the silencing of one who had observed them; and for all his slowness of mind it was in his thought that before he sought the shrewd Wong Chee it would be well to know how many men with sacks went through that door. So he waited and watched with care and kept himself within the shadow that none might see him. There were now and then men passing along, but none of them bore sacks upon the shoulder and none of them passed through the door with the "To Let" sign upon it. Yet he watched he was startled on a sudden to see the "To Let" sign itself disappear like the handkerchief that the juggler throws into the air. And Ah Kim, having watched vainly for further signs of the party who had gone through the door, joined a party of three who passed, and becoming one of the crowd went on his way to find his friend, the shrewd Wong Chee.

"It is well," said Wong Chee, when the case was explained. "There are many things in life that are more important than we should therefore endeavor to learn them from those who perchance may know more than we. Said you that these men were of a size?"

"Illustrious Wong Chee, I had not said. But, as I remember, they were tall and thin, and one was of middle size and stout, and the third was small and spare."

"Did the tall man have a scar from his eye to his chin; and did the stout man have a wart on his cheek; and was the small man lame in the right leg?"

"Indeed, my friend Wong Chee, I could not see the scar nor the wart for the darkness, but, as I remember, the small man did have the trace of a limp."

"You have done well, my inquisitive Kim. And if you go to the Joss tonight pray to him for your friends, for there is mischief afoot."

"Do they threaten my friends?" asked Ah Kim in an awestruck voice.

"Pray that it be none of your friends," said Wong Chee, with a mysterious shake of his head, "for when those three men went through that door it meant no good to the man who passes through it after them."

"Then I shall not pass it," said Ah Kim with a shiver; "and I shall stop at the house of the Joss as I go home and pray that none of my friends shall be hurt. It is a moment's silence, in which his curiosity rose superior to his fears, he continued: "Does your most profound wisdom inform you of the names of the three men who went through the door?"

Wong Chee considered, and answered with half-closed eyes:

"Is there one among the tong who has not heard of the Three Brothers of the Hatchet, who are a tong by themselves? We do not speak their names."

"Yes, I have heard," said Ah Kim with a shudder. "But were they ever known in our tong?"

"If you had been present at the meeting you would have remembered, my good Kim," said Wong Chee. "It was in the tenth year of Kwong Suey, not three years since, when Mow Yip Ting refused to pay his dues to the tong, and his case was brought before the meeting of the association. Then we sat in the dark, and the Voice of the Tong read the charge against Mow Yip Ting. And we listened in silence, and when it was asked if we would forgive the debt there was no voice raised for the merchant, for he had made his riches through the favor and protection of the tong, and he would evade the dues that even the poorest must pay." So, when the Voice of the Tong spoke through the darkness, and said that we had choice to forgive the debt or to inflict the punishment, there was a mutter as of the thunder that sounds in the distance, and it was the sentence of death to Mow Yip Ting. Then it was spoken in the darkness that it was not fit that one of the tong should do the deed, and a whisper ran through the air that this was work for the Brothers of the Hatchet. So it was said, and the reward was fixed, and I was made the voice of the tong to speak to the Three Brothers. Yes, I know the Three, and have seen them, but I do not speak their names, nor turn my eyes to their faces when I meet them on the street. You know the fate of Mow Yip Ting?"

"Who does not?" said Ah Kim.

"Indeed," sneered Wong Chee, placidly. "For many men have given up their lives in Chinatown, yet but three have suffered death in the manner of Mow Yip Ting."

"And Sam Suey was hanged for it by the police of the white devils," said Ah Kim.

"The art of the Three Brothers is past the power of the police to search out. For though the white devils are clever with machines, they are but children in the subtle workings of the mind, and know not falsehood from truth."

"Your wisdom is great, Wong Chee; yet is it great enough to say who goes through the door of the house that the Three Brothers have taken tonight?"

"It is great enough to say to you not to concern yourself with such thoughts. Think not of who the man may be. Make sure that he be none of your friends. Make sure that he be not yourself."

"Was Wong Chee, your counsel is of the best. I will go to the house of the Joss to pray for my friends and dismiss the Three Brothers from my thoughts."

And so saying he left Wong Chee, and turned his steps toward the shrine of the Joss that is in the long house in Commercial street. It was the way he thought were only of the Three Brothers of the Hatchet; and in the darkness he could see

with the eye of the mind the face of the Tall Brother with the scar running from eye to chin, and the Stout Brother with the wart on his cheek and the Small Brother who limped with his right leg. And the three glowered as they floated before him through the atmosphere of thought, and threatened him with silent words as he walked. So it was with alarm that came almost to consternation that Ah Kim found that his feet had brought him on more to the doorway from which he had seen the three brothers go with such mystery into the vacant house; and he halted as a man struck to stone. To his excited vision the three faces peered menacingly at him from every dark window, and told him that even in the obscurity of the doorway to which his feet had brought him he was observed; yet he could not fly from the danger, and watched the house as the bird watches the snake.

He looked intently for a sign of life, yet none was to be seen. No light glimmered from the windows. Men came by in ones and twos, and he shrank back into the shadow. Then, on a sudden, he saw a figure glide along the wall across the street, and disappear in the fatal doorway. Now Ah Kim shook as with an ague, and was alert for what might happen.

Was this the man for whom the Three Brothers had laid their snare? No victim would go so unsuspectingly to such a house, and alone. Yet curiosity was strong upon him, and he wished that he dared venture to the door and listen, and perchance learn

something of the dreadful deeds of the Three Brothers of the Hatchet.

As he looked and listened and trembled the men came along the way. He was relieved to see that they were white devils, and listened to their talk.

"I was sure that was the number," said one.

"Now, that's queer," said the other; and Ah Kim was stricken with fear to see that this was one of the white devils' policemen—for he had been arrested for the awful crime of holding a lottery ticket, and had been kept thirty days in jail. Yet he was not too much in fear to hear the policeman as he said: "That house has been to rent ever since I came on this beat."

"It is not so strange," said the other with a laugh, "for houses are sometimes rented."

Now Ah Kim trembled again, for at these words he knew the voice, and it was the voice of the good doctor for whom he worked, who had stood by him when he was in trouble, and had given him back his place after he had come from the jail.

"I would keep out of there if I was you," said the policeman.

"It's an old servant who is hurt to death and has sent for me," said the doctor, "and I couldn't refuse. A doctor, you know, must go when he's called."

"Well, that's the first Chinaman I ever heard of asking for a white doctor," said the policeman; and he bade the doctor good night and went his way.

Now, Ah Kim wished to cry out, for he had found the man who was to pass the door that hid the Three Brothers of the Hatchet. Yet his voice refused to come, for he was in fear of the white policeman. And shaken with the double apprehension for his employer and himself he did not recover power of voice or movement until the doctor had crossed the street and was swallowed up in the dark doorway. Then he hastened after him with a cry in his throat, that was stifled when he saw the door opened and a tall Chinese usher the doctor within. He halted as the face of the tall Chinese stared at itself on his mind, for it was a face of much evil, and it bore a scar that reached from eye to chin; and there was a malignant pleasure under its polite air as the tall man received the doctor and closed the door behind him.

Ah Kim leaned against the post without the door, faint and shivering, and put forth all his strength to keep his teeth from chattering. He was in mortal terror lest the sharp eye of the tall brother had spied him and the shadow of death was even now upon him. Two or three minutes passed and his heart steadied its fluttering beats. Yet instead of following his impulse to fly he crept closer to the door and crouched in the corner that he might listen and think and be out of the observation of any one who should come along the street. It was near the middle hour of the night, yet belated wayfarers passed now and then.

What idea was in his mind he could not have said. Gratitude he did not know, and friends one does not have among the white devils. Yet it was before him that he ought to save the white doctor, and it is not fit that one should see a man go thus to his death when one eats his bread. And then there was curiosity—the eager wish to know the work of the Three Brothers. Thus Ah Kim crouched against the door-post and strained his ears to catch a sound from the mysterious house. Yet listen as he might, the only sounds that came to him besides the smooth purring of the devil's cable that draws the white devils' street cars were the loud beats of his heart and the breathing that he tried to repress.

As he lay straining his ears at the door it came to his mind that this was a case for the shrewd Wong Chee, and he started to rise and go and seek him. Then he sank back for his fears what might happen while he should be away, and that Wong

Chee might come too late. Whatever was to be done must be done by him alone. The heart-seeking fear that followed this thought seemed to give him strength that was not his own. He rose, laid off his coat, and then put his hand cautiously on the door knob. No sound had come from the house while he had lain there and he felt assured that the Three Brothers were elsewhere than in the hall. It was with his heart that the door was locked, but to his surprise and relief it yielded as he turned the knob and no sound followed as he pushed it open. He drew his knife from his blouse and listened again; then he slipped through the narrow opening and closed the door without sound.

The darkness of the street was as the light of day to the darkness of the hall when the door was closed; yet it gave him courage, for if he could not see neither could he be seen, unless the Brothers had the gift of the devils to see in the dark. He stood for a minute, then a murmuring sound that came from overhead confirmed him in the opinion that the Three Brothers and their victims were up the stairs. A crepuscular glow, the very ghost of light, came to his eyes from above, and he divined that there lay the ascent.

His fears asked him if one of the Brothers did not lie between him and the source of that light. But reasoning that the grip of death would by then have been on the heart if one of the Brothers had been on the watch, he staked his life on the desperate trust that the crime for which they had come had taken the attention of the Three, and that none was left on guard.

So he moved forward step by step, and almost inch by inch, the fingers of the left hand touching the wall as his guide, his right hand gripping the knife, and eye and ear strained to catch the faintest hint that his presence was suspected. This noiselessly he came to the head of the stairs, and saw that a middle room was slight, and

not out the heart from Wong Chee if his hands were tied, yet if his hands were free and the surgeon's knife was put in them they had to fear the rashness of despair. Then the Small Brother advised that his hands be made to kneel before his hands were loosed. And thereupon Ah Kim saw him forced to his knees by the body of Wong Chee, and the Tall Brother flung the noose about the neck of the kneeling man, and the Stout Brother lifted the hatchet, while the Small Brother slipped the cords that bound his arms.

Now Ah Kim breathed hard and gripped his knife fast, for he feared that the life of the shrewd Wong Chee was lost. He had a wild wish to cry out to the doctor that there was a friend at hand, and that he should make an effort for life and freedom. Yet he knew that to cry out was folly, and would be death to him along with the shrewd Wong Chee and the good doctor, and he had to use all his strength to keep his teeth from chattering.

"What was that?" suddenly asked the Small Brother, pricking up his ears.

"I hear nothing," said the Stout Brother.

"A step on the stair, I thought," said the Small Brother.

"I locked the door," said the Tall Brother, with an evil smile. "It is Wong Chee's devil come for his soul."

Now at this Ah Kim could scarce keep himself from striking, for it is evil indeed to be between the Three Brothers of the Hatchet and the devils that come for the dying. And the Three Brothers themselves laid a little of their confident air; for even the Brothers, who feared not the Joss, liked not to think of the devils. But Ah Kim smiled in the midst of his fears at the mistake of the Tall Brother in thinking that he had locked the door.

"Well, let us make haste," said the Small Brother, "that the devils may finish their work." And with a move he shook the bonds from the doctor's arms and put in the doctor's right hand the surgeon's knife.

"No cut," he said.

At this word the doctor flung his arms about the Small Brother and dashed him to the floor, and at the same time made a mighty effort to rise.

"Strike, brother," cried the Small Brother to the one with the hatchet.

The hatchet was in the air, and the doctor's brains would have been scattered over the floor, but that Ah Kim, nerved by the danger of the men before him and by the noise of the devils on the stair behind him, had flung open the door, and with one leap buried his knife in the throat of the Stout Brother with the hatchet.

The Stout Brother flung up his arms with a scream, his blood spurted over the bald head of the doctor, his hatchet fell to the floor and his knees giving way, he fell and the doctor, who thought he thought he went down together, he struggled before the hands of the tall brother, the doctor was brought over with a jerk and assassins and victims lay in a heap. Ah Kim alone standing, with bloody knife and shak- ing knees, crying out: "In the extremity of terror, for the devils were not of the air, and the noise of devils was behind him, and he stood still for want of way to fly."

Then the devils burst into the room, seized upon Ah Kim with an oath, and in the maze of confused devils he thought he saw them strike the Small Brother and the Tall Brother with clubs till they lay still, bring the doctor to his feet and wipe the blood from his head; and his ears told him that they all talked at once. And at last he saw that the devils were not of the air, but of the white devils' police, and he learned that he and the Tall Brother and the Small Brother were under arrest, and that the Stout Brother had gone where the Joss and the devil deal with his kind. And dimly came to his mind the words of one of the policemen:

"I was that unslay you that I got these men and came back, for I found that

"I tell you before. The heart of Wong Chee," answered the Small Brother. "I cannot take it. The man is still alive." "He all same dead," replied the Small Brother. "White devil doctor man he like you as dead man; why he not like cut up live man?" "Why do you want me to cut up a live man?" asked the doctor. "We like see. Sometime maybe we like do."

"I cannot kill him. He has done no harm." "O, you think him good man?" exclaimed the Small Brother, contemptuously. "You think him all lite? He all same come tonight to say we get one thousand dolla kill- ing Lee. You think him good man, eh? He no sabby one tong say we get two thousand dolla kill him all same kill him." And at this humorous situation the Small Brother went off into diabolic laughter.

"Then did 'one tong' tell you to kill me?" asked the doctor. "I do not know the tong, and never harmed them."

The Small Brother's face took on a look of preternatural cunning, and he appeared to consider what excuse to give.

"Never one time kill white devil," he said at last. "And his eyes snapped eagerly, as though this had been the long desire of his life; and the bodies of the Tall Brother and the Stout Brother bent toward the doctor as though they were eager to have his blood. "We kill white devil doctor now if he not do what we say. Give us the heart of Wong Chee."

The Small Brother's tone at this became so menacing that the doctor gave himself up for a lost man. Ah Kim marveled at his coolness in the face of death, for though he was but a white devil, his voice changed not a whit.

"I cannot take it with bound hands," he said.

The Three Brothers consulted in Chinese, for they were unwilling to loose the hands of the doctor. It was true that he could

not out the heart from Wong Chee if his hands were tied, yet if his hands were free and the surgeon's knife was put in them they had to fear the rashness of despair. Then the Small Brother advised that his hands be made to kneel before his hands were loosed. And thereupon Ah Kim saw him forced to his knees by the body of Wong Chee, and the Tall Brother flung the noose about the neck of the kneeling man, and the Stout Brother lifted the hatchet, while the Small Brother slipped the cords that bound his arms.

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"I was that unslay you that I got these men and came back, for I found that

the house was vacant up to sundown. We was afraid of mischief afoot, and bided we found it."

Then the terror-stricken Ah Kim, when he found that he was arrested as one of the Three Brothers, fell upon the floor and howled, and called out his name to the doctor. And the doctor, having now recovered his shaken wits, knew Ah Kim.

"See here, officer," he said. "You've made a mistake. This fellow is my cook, and if it hadn't been for him I'm afraid you would have been a minute late."

And the doctor explained as much as he knew of the affair in which he had played so great a part, and Ah Kim pleaded out of the tale of the Three Brothers with a sad disarray of the English language. So Ah Kim was released on the doctor's promise to bring him before the court, and Wong Chee was brought to consciousness, and the surviving Brothers were taken to the prison and loaded with many crimes on the book of the police. And the policemen praised the courage of Ah Kim, and marveled at it as the strangest thing they had known.

"O," said Ah Kim nonchalantly, as an explanation: "Wong Chee, he may feel, 'doctor, he heep good man. No wan' 'em kill.'"

"I think," said Wong Chee, as he nursed his broken head, "that it was just as well that you did not stop in the house of the Joss to pray. You are not so much of a fool as you look."

And Ah Kim took this for much praise, for he had never known him as the shrewd Wong Chee.

THE BEST NATURAL APERIENT WATER.

Hunyadi János

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as late as it can, on the last day of November. Christmas comes on Monday.

The moon will be full on Thursday, January 28; Saturday, February 25; Monday, March 27; Tuesday, April 25; Thursday, May 25; Friday, June 23; Saturday, July 22; Monday, August 21; Tuesday, September 19; Wednesday, October 18; Friday, November 17, and Saturday, December 16. Contrary to the general rule, there will be but twelve moons, consequently none of the months of 1899 can have two within its limits.