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# FOUR O'CLOCK

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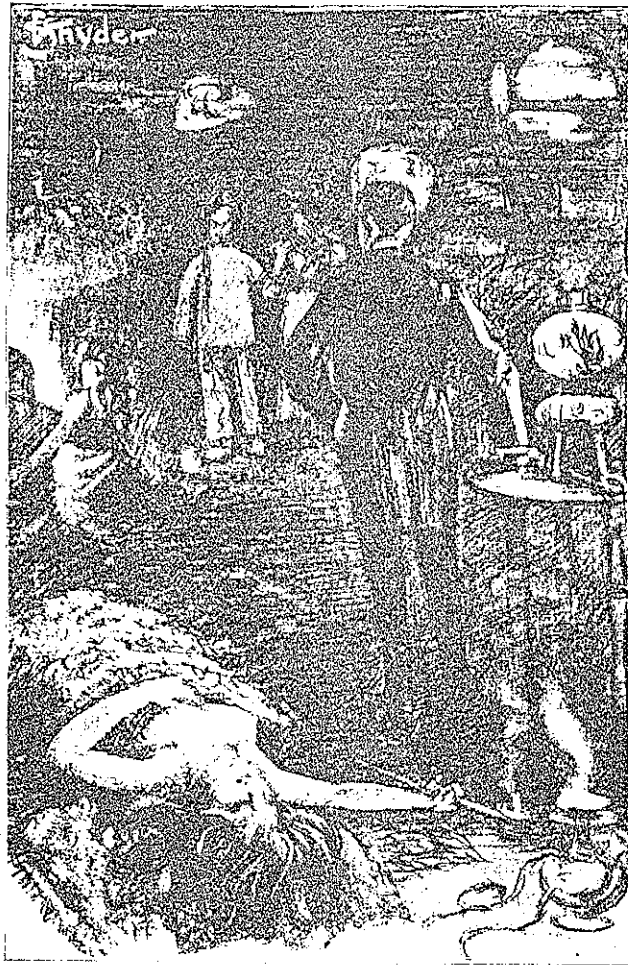
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"The Chinaman led the way through the open door"

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The Very Good Friends of Don Chapman . . . . . Alma Martin Estabrook



"The Chinaman led the way through the open door"

See THE POISON OF HEREDITY

FOUR O'CLOCK

I lay it at the feet of that accursed evil eye transmitted by inheritance.

The poison of heredity had infected and wrought upon me until I was as free of moral responsibility as the instinct of a common beast. My dual existence was a predisposition destined at birth by the curse of a predominating sin, and the vile ferments it agitated in my blood fought and writhed with themselves in that fatal embrace of power that balanced me like a pendulum between the hopes of heaven and despair of hell.

There is a cunning in the wiles of satan, and satan's offspring imbibes its rights. Cunning alone bought me this position in Bombay. Cunning buoyed me among the shoulders of magistrates and ambassadors. I found an extra vent in my dual life, one for good, the other for bad. Among the hills in the hot season, and among the commissioners and their wives in the temperate ones, I was stereotyped as an indispensable requisite—"Dick Dunning, late American Legation—since, writer and correspondent."

At the other end, where the devil in me rejoiced at the severed leash—but then, the pretty daughters and respectful mamas were innocent, and I was still Dick Dunning, envied but unenviable.

Five years from home little Rosebud was thirteen then, my baby sweetheart. Could I forget her? She and mother were the only two I had to love, and the curse was more bitter because of that. Oh, why should generations pass unscathed and the accursed blight at last select me its victim. I would not return to them now—no—never. For murder and sin were written on my heart.

My soul cried out in agony.

Thus I soliloquised this eventful eve, trading with stylish indifference, the white moon struck flags of upper Bombay just below Malabar Hill, and bound for the Colonel's ball.

My face was highly respectable. Why should it not be? Experience of inherent vice had not raised and squared my jaw, had not destroyed my mouth or bloodshot my eyes.

**FOUR O'CLOCK** Two narrow steps yet intervened themselves between that condition and mine, but—well, if it came to the worst, I would skip the first and take the second.

The Colonel's was on the slant of the broad avenue intersecting the gardens leading to Blacktown. I passed slowly over the brow of the hill, striking the flags a warning note now and then with my stick, and pausing ulti-



"Little Rosebud was thirteen then, my baby sweetheart"

mately for a moment before the down grade to watch the distant, oily glow of the sickly yellow flame beyond Malabar. It played a silent key-note to the stigmatized spirit of my inner self, and I wondered with a caustical bitterness if I saw the end there, with that horrid tower of silence shivering and quaking with the picked bones of dead men rattling

through the gratings, and its implacable row of human-eyed **FOUR** sentinels guarding the walls.

I shuddered dismally, and passed on down the moonlit hill to the Colonels.

The affair was like all others to me, stolid and indifferent, a nauseating fetich worshipped by those I must temporarily copy. The commissioner's daughter penned me lugubriously on a black divan at her feet, and then proceeded to entertain me with a cosmological idea of motion, indeed, she had always told mamma, Mr. Dunning was a cosmopolite, and mamma just doted on them, and dancing was a motion, and a very nice one, too, wasn't it?

The hint struck deep, but I preferred to sit it out. The commissioner's daughter was one of those girls who have been whirled in a sand-storm beyond the hills or in the Punjab, and could converse of more topics than one. I fancied her in that heartless way of mine, and confessed it was an opportunity worth the plucking. Perhaps she divined my thoughts, and placed her hand on my arm to give me courage. I looked up.

"Oh, I beg your pardon; I fear I am intruding."

It was only a girl who had passed too close. Only a momentary glimpse of a fleeting face, only a voice of dulcet sweetness asking forgiveness. Oh, my God! My face turned cold and ashen. "I am ill, Miss Macaskie, please pardon me."

In the conservatory I ordered an ice and concealed myself behind a luxuriant wall of foliage. I had dared to analyze my own peculiar case once, and had pronounced myself invulnerable. But that girl's face—it was terrible. Like an electric shock of poignant intensesness, the soul of the stranger had burned into mine for just one moment, and in the sudden shaft piercing the testaceous shell of my baneful personality, I detected the precursory gleam of a heavenly moral restitution.

What affected me? Was it her wonderful beauty? Never had I seen such ravishingly crimson lips, such a face of warmth and glow. Could I picture anywhere in my imagination hair like hers, of the deepest raven, drawn low over the dark pink cheeks in rich silken waves, and laughing with transient lights that lost themselves in the deeper lustre of her dark eyes? It was a dark face, but

made lighter and softer by the delicious color that beautified it. No, I argued, it is not her beauty; I have met beautiful women before.

And not until then did I detect in the air about me the fragrant scent of a perfumed cigarette, one of those voluptuous, sweet-spiced things called a Turkish balm. I turned quickly, and confronted a laughing face behind a big fern just back of me.

"The deuce, Dunning, you're all cut up. Been rejected, eh? I've been watching the silent bursting of your heart for ten minutes or more. No offense, I hope."

"I'm cut up mortally, Hulbert," I replied, slowly parting the bunch of ferns and exposing the half-concealed form behind them. "And if you are not altogether too unreasonable, old fellow, and are gratuitously inclined for once in your life, you can fit me up again as good as new. I am dying, yes, tediously worrying myself to death, for an introduction."

Hulbert whistled softly, and dropped his charred cigarette.

"And the charming damsel can be no other than—than—well, why don't you go on, Dick?"

"I thought perhaps you might supply the nonentity. It's the stranger, the girl with the glorious hair and eyes, and such heavenly lips, not out of her teens, I conjecture."

"Yes—Lady Terrell, of London, a mightily independent girl, strange, too, with neither chaperons nor introductions. No one knows her, intimately I mean, but every one, down to the Colonel himself, has fallen desperately in love with her. Come."

"Amuse yourself for a moment or two while I make a flying visit to the cloak room, Jim. If I have to stand before the great judge and testify for you in the hereafter, I'll clear you or go snucks along with you down into oblivion, old man. You're an angel."

"Rather incarnate," he laughingly replied; and while he lighted a fresh cigarette, I hurried through the conservatory toward the dressing-room.

The love-knot doubled in my tie by Miss Macaskie was a trifle too discriminating, and might incline the Lady Terrell to singular effeminate impressions of her own,

more distressing to me than embarrassing, and an outward display of this facetious buffoonery in open society would, I felt indubitably assured, discredit me in the eyes of the lovely stranger.

With an ingenuous artlessness that was as much a new factor in my existence as energy to freshly made wine, I proceeded to dissolve the intricate knot before a mirror in a little flower-strewn alcove, separated from the hall by curtained doors and an exuberant barrier of dark-foliaged plants.

I had scarcely fingered the single bow to my satisfaction, and had not yet drawn the loop, when another face appeared beside mine in the glass. It was Lady Terrell.



"I proceeded to dissolve the intricate knot"

her dark eyes luminous as stars, and her lips compressed so tightly and firmly that the tender beauty of her mouth was spoiled by the rigid lines.

"May I help you?" she asked.

What a flood of drunken thought intoxicated me with its promised indulgences as I turned from the mirror to confront the beautiful apparition. Dick Dunning, of the lower elements! Mad fancies careered through my brain in so many fractional seconds. Lady Terrell was fast—very fast—or she would not have sought me, a stranger, in one of the most secluded corners of the great house. I smiled, and bowed low over the temptingly pretty little hand.

"If you please, Miss—"

I paused, suggestively, a questioning accentuation in my voice, but the red lips retained their tense rigidity, and the white hands fluttered at my throat for only a moment, and were done.

"I do not desire your acquaintance, nor your name, Mr. Dick Dunning. Good night."

The faint gleamings of the waning moon were just touching the summit of Malabar Hill, and the old Hindoo gun in the citadel's tower had boomed the drowsy midnight warning an hour since. I played my last hand of solitaire on the stone terrace of the tower, and stood long like a dark statue silhouetted against the wooded gardens ere I stumbled through the gloomy shadows envisioning the foul way to Blacktown and the wharves.

As I stole along like some hunted thing of crime, the Lady Terrell's eyes leering scornfully at me from every moonshaft, and the dead stillness and infected air of the vitiated precincts of felony becoming ever more palpable, a form staggered past me, its ghost-like face turning to mine an instant, a look of truculence and hell's ferociousness that stamped the prudent soul forever beyond redemption.

I laughed aloud and flung a scathing curse or two after the retreating figure, as I halted in front of the crescent green lamp on the corner, and entered Kippi Ki-Yi's ranch.

The fetid odor of burning opium rushed out into the night air as the door swung open. A little earlier, and I fancied the girl's voice and greeting would have been less hushed. But the hour was far advanced, and her fawning cajoleries were vapid and lifeless in the drowsy fumes, I pulled off my gloves, and she aroused herself from her mystic state of beatific fancy and vision of delicious and gorgeous imagery to lead me to the parlor.

The perfumed air was oppressively close, and the cushioned chair I occupied smelled nauseatingly of rancid spices. A dozen figures lay dozing in various attitudes of luxurious ease on rugs and sofas, and only two or three still asserted their influence over the opium reed. One was deftly revolving a little globule of fat; another, his companion, a young girl with brilliant eyes and a hectic flush in either sallow cheek, roasted a dripping dip over the sputtering flame of an oil lamp. Both were silent, but the man's disengaged arm was twined tightly about the girl's waist. The dense white vapor enveloped them, and I could hear their labored respiration as they inhaled the fumes.

I turned my head, and caught Ki-Yi's half-closed eyes fixed steadily on me across the room.

"Ah savee, much um sleek okum," he said, and glided toward me like a stealthy cat with the outfit: "hit um pipe." And with a hideous leer that illumined the grisly cavernousness of his countenance with a terribly vindictive light he stole through the door.

Nonchalantly I lifted the pointed wire and twisted it musingly between my fingers. The Colonel's ball had ended. What occult conjectures had my precipitate flight engendered? What a look of terror transfixed the girl's face as I cried aloud in my despair and rushed past her to the cloak room and the open street. Somehow I felt like blaspheming God and nature, and I did. "Ha, Dick," I cried, "Providence and the devil have forsaken you, now for the one quick leap that transmutes you from the flesh and blood of a creator to the soul and satan of a gorgeous hell!"

The girl with the flushed cheeks turned her glistening eyes toward me and from her thin lips fell a dry, mirthless laugh of approval. She nudged her companion, and his dull features slowly responded with a lurid grin.

FOUR O'CLOCK of lascivious suggestiveness that transformed the lewd countenance of the oriental into a god by comparison.

A subdued murmur of voices in the hall afforded an opportune excuse for turning my back upon the hideous spectacle, and I watched with an unwonted interest for the appearance of the new arrival. The Chinaman led the way through the open door, his pitted face all aglow with the yellow radiance of a ghastly triumph, and his long, narrow eyes shooting but two hard, metal gleams of light straight before him.

Behind him came a woman. She hesitated on the threshold, and for a moment covered her veiled face with two trembling hands. With a little nod she indicated my direction, and Ki-Yi seated her opposite me at the table.

"Sleec—sleec," hissed the Chinaman in my ear, with a repulsive chuckle deep down in his throat. "Oakum drunk—veil off—sleec—sleec—sleec—boo'ful gal." And with this parting hint the yellow devil slunk away.

It was evident the girl heard and understood him.

She loosened her gloves, and tearing them from her hands flung them beside mine on the matted floor.

"Oh, God, at last—at last—my subversion accomplished."

The veiled head sank down upon the table, and the stranger's whole form was convulsed with a throbbing storm of anguish and grief. I record the event with honor to myself, that not once did I curse her above my breath; and when cursing had done itself full justice, a flood of commiseration and sympathy followed close the reaction, fully commensurate to the harsher nature of Dick Dunning, debauchee.

How to tender my condolence mystified me. I coughed and squirmed, and when I had done squirming in my chair, nearly upset the table with a tremendous sneeze. What these requisites failed to perform singly, was accomplished by the whole.

"I—I—am sorry I annoy you," she whispered, piteously. "Oh, please help me."

"That I will," I returned gently; and reaching across the scattered outfit I took her soft little hand in mine, where it lay trembling, fluttering for all the world like a tiny, frightened bird. "Only one question, my poor little friend, and I will help you if I can. Have you

resisted temptation until tonight? And you still free **FOUR O'CLOCK** from—"

The girl hushed her sobbing, and snatched her hand away almost fiercely.

"You insinuate that which reproaches me too bitterly to tolerate without a slight defense. Your catechism may be kindly disposed, but the presumption that I throw myself despairingly at your feet in a paroxysmal fit of imbecility precludes any desire on my part to accept your sympathy. Listen, then, would I not be a fool to petition the advice of an opium sot, and anticipate relief of one already submerged in that terrible chaos on the wretched brink of which I cling this night?"

"But if beside you there stood another, the one you so pitilessly condemn, would you not exhibit a little clemency, and cry God speed to a disheartened soul about to die?"

"And are you situated thus?" she faltered, hopelessly endeavoring to smother her emotion beneath the heavy veil. "Until tonight all was well," I whispered.

"And tonight."

Something, then, was on my face, and I detected an expression of the Colonel's, not your name.

"My God!"

"Tell me beseechingly, 'No—' It was the Lady T but another dark eyes and of hell.

"Oh, my words into night. To Ville, room into a full Tedion



"My God!" I cried

FOUR O'CLOCK  
AUGUST

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"And are you situated thus?" she faltered, hopelessly endeavoring to smother her emotion beneath the heavy veil.

"Until tonight all was well," I whispered.

"And tonight—tonight—" she cried, eagerly. "Why tonight?"

Something like a nausea gnawing at my heart seized me, then with a suddenness that drove the blood from my face, and I fancied in the impassioned voice I again detected an echo of the cold words that exiled me from the Colonel's ball: "I do not desire your acquaintance, nor your name, Mr. Dick Dunning, good night."

"My God," I cried.

"Tell me—tell me—why to-night," she entreated, beseechingly.

"No—no—oh, my God, I am dying."

It was not the Lady Terrell's voice I heard; not the Lady Terrell's lovely face I pictured in my heart, but another, thousands of miles away—another, whose dark eyes and sweet love beckoned me still from the path of hell.

"Oh, my rosebud—my little darling."

The stranger sprang to her feet and almost hissed the words into my ear. "We will resist satan together to-night. Tomorrow at ten you will meet me at Hotel Ville, room fourteen. Perhaps the bud has developed into a full-blown rose, and—good night."

Tediously the ecstatic emotions produced by the

**FOUR O'CLOCK**

lingering scent of burned opium relinquished their subtle influence over my capricious vision, and at late dawn I crept silently past the form of the slumbering girl, and out into the damp morning air of the wharves toward Malabar Hill.

My raiment was strongly redolent with the foul odor of the oriental's black resort, but my heart danced lightly with the blissful rapture of a new-born soul, and I hummed a few old gladsome tunes as I toiled up the rifted flags of the Hill, living the old days over again with my little sweetheart across the sea.

The hour of ten arrived.

Immaculately as ever I attired myself in a stainless livery of dark seal brown, and just as the Hindu gun boomed the appointed hour, I inquired for room fourteen, Hotel Ville.

Lady Terrell admitted me. "You are late," she complained. "See I have recovered from my mad excursion of the night." Her cheeks were flushed with fever, and a soft, burning lustre glowed in her dark eyes. "I would rather you had come to me at dawn. The Ocean Greyhound sails at high noon."

"And—you—sail—with—it?"

"Ara't you going with me, Dick? Ara't you going with me—to home and mother, and your little sweetheart across the sea? Dick, Dick! are you mad? Don't you know I came to take you home? Oh, God! have you forgotten me?"

My Rosebud and I are far out upon the deep blue ocean. Long ere this the white-tiled roofs and glistening sands of Bombay have sank below the waters on the purple horizon, and we two sit alone in the fast waning light of the dying moon and dream of home. The deck is shrouded with the leaden hue of gathering darkness. I whisper a word in my darling's ear.

Hand in hand we leave the damp sombreness of the approaching gloom.

[J. Olivier Curwood.