

A Remarkable Oriental Experience.

A THRILLING STORY OF CHINESE TREACHERY.

CHAPTER XI.

It was at this point that it became necessary for me (as had been determined) to assume the Chinese dress.

The guide was to go into the city to procure the raiment needed, and to return with this as soon as possible. I was unaware, until now, that Chin-chin-wa had any intention of accompanying him, or of entering the city prior to my doing so, as now appeared to be the case. He explained to me his reason for so doing, which chiefly lay in this—that it is inadvisable that we should have some fixed residence, if possible, before nightfall, and that the quietest residence was the more advantageous.

When formerly in Pekin, Chin-chin-wa had lived with a curio-dealer, so he told me—a man whose dealings were almost entirely with the Chinese, for at that time customers of any other nationality were exceedingly rare; and here he had found board and lodging during a lengthy stay in the capital.

If this dealer was still alive, Chin-chin-wa was anxious to find him, for, from previous acquaintance, he knew the man to be fairly discreet; and he was of opinion that if the dealer was, as he had been eighteen years ago, still in the position to receive us in his house, we could not be more fortunate in the choice of a home.

During the period of his captivity much might have occurred; and the dealer, if still alive, had possibly changed his residence; if so, Chin-chin-wa intended to discover his present abode, or, in default, to light upon some lodging which he could engage against his return in my company later in the day.

I foresaw the prudence of arranging a lodging, and left myself entirely in the hands of Chin-chin-wa in the matter, and accordingly he set out, accompanied by the guide, for the city, leaving me to the solitude of my own thoughts for a few hours to come.

I do not think I have spent many days in which the hours dragged so slowly. For a time, it is true, I slept when first I was left alone; but shortly the bustle in the courtyard of the inn, and the noise made by the entry of mules and carts, banished sleep, and from that time forth I employed myself chiefly in counting the hours and calculating the period at which I might expect Chin-chin-wa or the guide to return.

I did not then know that Chin-chin-wa had instructed the guide to meet him at a certain place in Pekin, and to wait his arrival there; and thus I looked for the return of either, and not of the two in company.

But the hours went sluggishly by, and brought no signs of either Chin-chin-wa or the guide. I consumed the cold chicken which the guide had left with me, and I strolled a little way from the inn, and endeavored in various ways to pass the time; but my watch must have been very frequently in my hands, notwithstanding.

Afternoon came. At two o'clock I began to be alarmed, for it seemed to me that there must be some reason for the delay.

"Distances, I had heard, were very great in Pekin; but surely, if we were but half a mile from the walls, Chin-chin-wa and my guide should have returned long ere now. What had happened? Had Chin-chin-wa fallen in danger a second time by reason of the exile's mark, and had I then lost both my ally and my guide?

A strange ally seemed to me to hang about our movements; but two days had we been upon the road, and already, for the second time, misfortune seemed to have fallen upon us. I strove to banish my doubts, and in this manner another hour passed, when the certainty of misfortune came upon me with full force.

My position was far from an enviable one. I was alone in a strange land, half a mile from Pekin, not knowing by what means to gain the city, or how to proceed should I reach and enter the gates, and I was tied down for a lengthy period to come by the uncertainty of doubt.

Were I to set out in person for the capital, I might easily reach it before nightfall, that is to say, before the closing of the gates, which I had been told took place at six o'clock; but allowing that I entered the city in ample time, and that I should have found little trouble in guiding myself to the nearest gate way, I should in all probability risk passing Chin-chin-wa or the guide upon my way, as we might choose diverse routes, and thus whilst I had gone upon the search for them they might have returned to find that a search for me had become necessary, owing to my having been absent during their prolonged absence. All things considered, I decided upon waiting patiently in hopes that all might still be well; but when my watch told me that it was five o'clock, my patience resolved itself into despair, and I looked forward to a lengthy and anxious night, in which I should be troubled and kept from sleeping by all manner of conjectures and doubts.

It struck me that the situation curiously enough, must be somewhat analogous to that in which William Norris had been placed a year ago; only to appearance my position was even worse than his had been, because I had no carter to depend upon, and no one near me who had the slightest knowledge of my wishes, and were Chin-chin-wa and my guide actually the victims of some misfortune, nothing seemed more likely to my disturbed mind than that I, too, should disappear from the world as silently and as utterly as had the man who had trusted his life to the swallow's wing!

I began to understand, now, how easy it is for a life to be lost in a strange land, and to be lost in such a way that there is no trace left, and no thread by which the labyrinth of a silent fate may be undone.

At six o'clock there was still no sign of the return of either Chin-chin-wa or the guide. My feelings were embittered.

At the very outset of my quest, I was met by difficulty and obstruction. All my plans seemed to be upset, and I could no more guess the cause of the affair than I could foresee what was left for me to do. I made up my mind that something of an unprecedented nature had happened, and that both Chin-chin-wa and the guide, and a sudden despair overcame me as I recollected that the gates of Pekin closed at six o'clock, and that for twelve hours thereafter there was no possibility of the return of either of the two, for already they must be shut within the city gates.

I endeavored to look the matter calmly in the face, but this was far from easy. By the morning I should still wait their return for, say, a couple of hours. After that time, it was questionable what was to be done. If I followed my natural inclination, I should proceed to the Legation in Pekin; but to all intents I seriously injured my search for William Norris by so doing, for the absence of my companions would result in inquiry which would certainly to a large extent affect, indirectly, the cause of him whom I had come to seek.

I was debating the point in no enviable frame of mind, when, to my extreme astonishment Chin-chin-wa entered the yard and approached me.

To one who had indeed looked upon him as lost, the revulsion of feeling was sudden in the extreme. I could merely give vent to an ejaculation of surprise, and a sense of "chaik-fun" filled me as a strange contrast to that isolation which had dwelt in me, and around me, but a few moments previously.

Chin-chin-wa appeared to be unharmed; my suspicions of misfortune had proved groundless.

He hastened to explain. I need not give the essence of what he had to say. The following is what he said:

After leaving me he and the guide had proceeded, as arranged, into the city. They had parted company shortly after passing the gate, the guide going in one direction to purchase my prospective clothing, Chin-chin-wa in the other to seek our future home. But, before separating, Chin-chin-wa had given the guide instructions to meet him at a certain eating-house, and to remain there awaiting him, should he be detained. This the guide agreed to do.

Chin-chin-wa set out for the house where he had formerly lived, to find on his arrival there, that he had not been far wrong in his conjecture before leaving me, that the dealer might have changed his abode, for he was actually the case, and the new residence was—so he was informed—in a district far distant from that where he now was.

However, he set out again; but, on account of the great distance and insufficient directions given him, it was already afternoon before he found the domicile of this curio-dealer. He set arranged with this man to receive us. So far all was well.

Leaving the dealer, Chin-chin-wa set out for the eating-house, where after a long journey, he finally arrived; but, as it now transpired, the guide had, after waiting for his return for a prolonged period set out after him, knowing the district and the house at which Chin-chin-wa had first called.

Thus it came that the guide committed the mistake which I might have made; he had set out upon a search, without due consideration of the events which might mean-time occur.

Chin-chin-wa was no little enraged, but determined to wait for the guide till the last moment, and the man did finally return in sufficient time for the two to leave the city before the gates were closed.

"Just as we reached the gate," concluded Chin-chin-wa, "an exclamation from the guide arrested my steps. We were right, after all, Mr. Vancombe, to trust to chance. Had my old friend been in his former dwelling, your guide would not have stupidly set out to track my steps; and, had he not done so, we would not have been passing out of Pekin almost at the moment when the gates were swung forward and closed."

"What do you mean?" I interrupted.

"I mean," he replied, "that your guide has, by a strange chance, lit upon the very carter whom he has not seen since he left William Norris in Pekin. I mean that he had scarcely time to explain to me that this carter had just passed us entering Pekin, and that I had but a moment to seize from him this bundle, your Chinese clothes, before the gate swung upon its hinge and shut me without the walls, and the guide, who had turned after the important clew, within."

"The carter found?" I exclaimed, starting to my feet. "I can not believe it."

"But," he replied, "the carter is found, nevertheless."

So instead of being against us, the fates had been for us! All seemed likely to be plain sailing from henceforth. My only doubt was lest the guide should have lost sight of the man after all; but this Chin-chin-wa assured me was far from likely.

The guide had bounded after him, as man and cart had entered the city; and there and then I had but a moment to fall in with him, and would detain him without fail against our arrival on the following day.

It was indeed a fortunate chance, and the knowledge of the discovery took from me almost entirely the memory of the long, weary hours through which I had waited for Chin-chin-wa's return, and despair until he had stood in person before me.

Perhaps I hoped and expected to much from the finding of the carter. Chin-chin-wa expressed his opinion to this effect. I could not see where and in what way he could fail us, but fail he did, signally and effectually, on the following day. On this morning I was just completing my new toilet under Chin-chin-wa's direction, feeling, I must confess, somewhat as I have felt on the eve of the fancy ball, notwithstanding the serious nature of the circumstances in which I now assumed a foreign dress, when the guide arrived, he having seized the earliest opportunity of leaving the city on the reopening of the gates.

To my delight I saw that he was not alone; the carter had accompanied him into the yard. I looked at this carter—at his heavy features and sleepy-looking eyes, and a sudden pain went through me as it were in a mental whisper, "What if he should not remember—that if he have forgotten Norris entirely during the months which have gone?"

Chin-chin-wa was already speaking to him; so—my impatience had satisfaction in this, that no fraction of time was passed as lost. But the man stared vacantly in answer to his words, and that was all. Then, so far as I could gather from his tone of voice and the abrupt way in which he spoke, Chin-chin-wa proceeded to question him narrowly; and, after speaking in this way for some little time, the man addressed opened his lips and answered something—something very short.

Chin-chin-wa spoke again several words; the carter briefly replied. Then Chin-chin-wa turned angrily upon the guide, and poured forth a torrent of words, whilst the guide stood with his head bent down, thoroughly cowed.

But in a little he answered, and half raised his eyes with a sullen, dogged look upon his face.

Chin-chin-wa turned to me. "The guide states that this is the carter, without a doubt; are we to believe him? This fellow here, he says, is the carter whom he lets with William Norris; and the carter knows absolutely nothing of the whole affair. Either the guide is lying, or the carter has forgotten entirely what happened a year ago. Which of the two are we to believe?"

"Have you tried every means? Is there no possibility of recalling the memory, if there be a memory, to the man's brain?"

"I have tried everything," you have heard me speaking to him. I shall question him further, and more fully, if you wish; I know it is useless."

"Please do so, notwithstanding," I urged; and my request he questioned the man at great length, obtaining an occasional word in answer, and that was all.

"It is quite useless," he said, finally; "he has no recollection whatever of being taken a prisoner; or of having been employed by an English gentleman or by this guide; and the guide, on the contrary, asserts that this is the man. What are we to make of it?"

"Send them into the road, and let them fight it out between them," answered the thorough disgust. "How did the guide secure him, and why did he bring him here, when he found that he had made a mistake?"

"He says there is no mistake; and he promised the carter a reward. He admits having found him as dead as a stone as far as his mental powers are concerned, but that was not his affair. He was to find him and to bring him to us; these were his instructions, and he says that he has fulfilled them."

"Perhaps he is right," I answered angrily. "The specimen of humanity he has succeeded in bringing us is certainly to appearance about as brainless-looking as they make them. Send them away, will you, and let us consider what is to be done." Give the carter an hour or two to cudgel his brains, and tell the guide to assist him. If the guide can not do it, there is little chance."

"I am of your opinion," answered Chin-chin-wa. "I shall put it to the guide that we refuse to believe him, and that this will injure him as a guide, unless he can prove to us that he has spoken true, by causing the carter to remember, and to tell us what he recollects."

The guide, who caught some of our words, notwithstanding that we spoke quickly, so that he might not understand, looked up as Chin-chin-wa again addressed him in his own tongue, as though he already knew what burden we were about to lay upon him.

Thus what had seemed an hour or two ago to be a valuable gain had proved but a bubble in the end. I could not conceal my annoyance from Chin-chin-wa, whose philosophical calm throughout struck me as offering a singular contrast to my own feelings. Only for a moment had I seen him truly angered, and that had been when he had added to the guide, to accuse him of having brought a substitute in lieu of the man whom we sought.

Upon discussing the matter, we were inclined to place a degree of reliance in the guide rather than otherwise. For it seemed by no means an improbable thing that a man of such low caste as this carter should have forgotten actual occurrences; and the guide, who had been a witness to his employment by us; therefore, unless he had actually and honestly found the real man, he would have not been in a hurry to produce the sham, unless indeed—and it was Chin-chin-wa who made this suggestion—he had been so frightened by the occurrence of the day before, when the thief had fled from the village inn, and the guide, who had been a witness to his employment by us; therefore, unless he had actually and honestly found the real man, he would have not been in a hurry to produce the sham, unless indeed—and it was Chin-chin-wa who made this suggestion—he had been so frightened by the occurrence of the day before, when the thief had fled from the village inn, and the guide, who had been a witness to his employment by us; therefore, unless he had actually and honestly found the real man, he would have not been in a hurry to produce the sham, unless indeed—and it was Chin-chin-wa who made this suggestion—he had been so frightened by the occurrence of the day before, when the thief had fled from the village inn, and the guide, who had been a witness to his employment by us; 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