

The Sealed Room

Happiness is Born in the Shadow of a Tragedy

By Edwin Baird
PART II.

Tom had journeyed ten blocks or more before perceiving that he, in his haste, had taken the wrong street car: he was travelling north when he ought to be going south.

Alighting at the next corner, he beheld a milieu of garish saloons, cheap hotels and white-front restaurants. The same note was struck here as in the down-town district, only it had a more brassy tone.

He cast his gaze along the noisy thoroughfare, and it was then he saw the shabby gilt sign: Wah Sing Lo.

It adorned the second-floor level of a disreputable building, and over the dingy floor below a yellow and red glass sign, illuminated by a flickering gas jet, proclaimed the upper region of a Chinese eating place.

Now, Tom McKay, for all his periodical trips to Chicago and his thirty years of bachelorhood, had never tasted Oriental food. Moreover, his train would not leave for at least two hours. He crossed the street, ascended the narrow staircase, and entered the establishment of Wah Sing Lo.

It was a queer-smelling, dimly lit place, and, since the hour was unripe for North Clark Street, it was totally devoid of patrons. Tom took a seat at one of the greasy marble-topped tables, and a shrivelled, wrinkled little Chinaman unwrapped himself from a high stool behind the fly-specked cigar case, padded across the floor in a cat-like fashion, and stood awaiting orders.

Tom drew a coffee-stained menu from between a bottle of tomato ketchup and a vinegar cruet, glanced about him, then bent a puzzled gaze upon the foreign words on the bill of fare. And then, for no apparent reason, there came between him and these meaningless words the dark blue eyes of a girl, and the eyes seemed wistful and full of sadness.

Strange, truly! And yet not half so strange as that which swiftly followed: He passed his hand before his eyes as if to erase the vision, and when he drew his hand away he saw, not two rods distant, the girl herself!

There could be no doubt of it. He would have known her in a million. She stood near the cigar case, glancing about in a frightened way, and even in that moment of mental turmoil he remarked an increase in her nervousness.

Himself agitated, he resumed contemplation of the menu, affecting to be oblivious of her. But his heart was pounding tumultuously, and the uninviting room wherein he sat was suddenly glorified. Her inexplicable presence had changed everything.

He looked up into the expressionless face of the Chinaman and smiled in sheer exuberance: "Are you Wah Sing Lo?"

The Mongol nodded silently. His face was a yellow mask.

"Well, Mr. Lo, I think somebody wants to see you over there."

Without so much as a glance toward the girl, Mr. Lo answered tonelessly:

"I know. She wait, all right. What you want—huh?"

"See what she wants first," said Tom.

Still the Chinaman displayed no interest.

"Nelly mind gal. What you want eat—huh?"

Tom flung the menu on the table and half rose from his chair. At the same moment the girl came toward him, and when she drew near a new delight surged in his veins—for she couldn't disguise the recognition which leapt to her eyes when she saw him.

Ignoring his presence, however, she addressed the Chinaman. At their first words Tom saw that they knew each other.

"Lo," she said in her soft, musical voice, "I've come for Dora. Where is she?"

Lo was swabbing the table with a dirty towel, his back toward her.

"Nelly mind Dola. Dola all light. You mind own business."

"I've come to take Dora home, Lo."

"Mind own business."

"Is she up-stairs?"

"Mind own tamn—"

At this juncture Tom entered matters—and entered zestfully. Like the jaws of a steel trap his sinewy fingers closed on the Chinaman's shrivelled neck.

"Speak civilly to this lady," he ordered, "or I'll shake the life out of you!"

With a dexterous movement Lo wriggled free and backed hurriedly away, his yellow face lived with anger and fright. He pointed a trembling talon at the door.

"Get out!" he croaked hoarsely. "Cheap skate! Get out!"

Ignoring him, Tom turned to the girl.

"I gather you're looking for someone here," he said. "If I can help you—"

The girl flushed, and stood hesitating, evidently reluctant to accept help from a stranger and yet in dire need of that help.

"I—I—yes. A friend," she stammered, "up-stairs. If you—if you—"



Like the jaws of a steel trap his sinewy fingers closed on the Chinaman's neck

Something of her predicament dawned on Tom, and he interjected respectfully:

"It really isn't safe for a woman to be alone in a place like this. Can't I find your friend for you?"

The girl nodded mutely, and they started toward the rear. Neither knew, of course, that Lo was signaling savagely, behind their backs, to another Chinaman who stood in the kitchen doorway, and who, as it chanced, failed to observe these signals.

As they approached, this second Oriental drew from his blouse a bit of soiled paper on which was penciled a street address, and silently gave it to Tom. Lo uttered an angry sound and, still unnoticed, crept stealthily in their direction, a murderous expression distorting his yellow face.

Tom hastily scanned the writing on the paper and handed it to the girl.

"What do you make of it?"

She, reading, was palpably puzzled.

"It's only a block away—the next street south," she said, knitting her pretty brows over the lead-pencil scrawl. But—that's all I know about it."

"What next?" he asked.

"I think we'd better go up-stairs."

As they moved toward the narrow stairway beyond the kitchen door, the second Chinaman began chattering in his native tongue and, gesticulating excitedly, essayed to bar their way.

Disregarding him, they attempted to ascend the stairs, and in that instant Lo darted forward, as swift and silent as a panther, and flung himself on Tom's back with the ferocity of a wildcat. Simultaneously the other Chinaman joined the conflict.

During the violent struggle which promptly ensued, the girl stood on an upper step, staring wide-

eyed at the grappling men, both hands flattened against her cheeks. And she saw her unknown champion seize one of his antagonists around the waist and hurl him headlong down the stairs, and then, with a well-directed blow, he sent the other Chinaman reeling after.

"Quick!" he panted. "Up the stairs!"

And now they were scuttling up the dark passageway, and the rickety door at the top admitted them to a low-ceilinged corridor, rank, foul, and excessively hot, and coated with soot and cobwebs. A burning gas jet, turned low, shed a wan light on the squalor, and cast a pale gleam eerily along the blackened walls.

And they perceived that its flickering flame revealed the figure of a queer little man—so queer, indeed, as to seem an apparition—coming toward them along the hall. Balanced precariously atop his head was a girl's flamboyant picture hat, such as one might find at a bargain sale in a department store, and he carried in his arms a huge, misshapen bundle, loosely tied in a bedsheet.

When a few feet away, he lowered his burden and gaped at them over his black-rimmed eyeglasses, which straddled the tip of his aquiline nose. The action, though slight, dislodged his feminine headgear, and it fell to the floor, unheeded. He was totally, glaringly, funnily bald. His dome not only was quite devoid of hair, it was polished till it shone like an ostrich egg and he was clad in clerical garb.

"Dear, dear!" said he in a surprisingly deep voice, and plucked a large white handkerchief from his ministerial coat tails. "Dear me!" he repeated, applying the handkerchief to his perspiring brow. "What's this? What's this?"

Tom, staring curiously at the odd little man, acutely aware of an increasing mystery, mentally echoed the question.

If Packingtown was a strange place in which to sprout the seed of romance, how much stranger still to find a minister in a spot like this!—and no ordinary minister, either, but a bald-headed minister wearing a girl's hat and decamping, evidently, with a sheet load of plunder!

Marvellous things, truly, were happening on this summer's night!

Part of the mystery, at any rate, was speedily dissolved. The bald little man introduced himself, in nervous agitation, as Rev. Philip Webb, who lately had assumed control of the Star of Good Hope Mission for Friendless Girls.

"Are you two, I wonder, looking for Miss Dora Kirk, the unhappy young woman who formerly lived here?"

They told him that they were, and Tom's companion added, a world of anxiety in her gentle voice.

"You say she 'formerly lived here.' Isn't she living here now? She was here this morning, I'm sure."

"Only two hours ago," said Rev. Webb, "we took her to our mission—a frail and broken flower. But I'm happy to say," he went on, vigorously mopping the beads of perspiration from his glistening scalp, "she's quite comfortably situated now. She is in the care of our matron, Mrs. Buckle, a most excellent woman."

"Thank Heaven for that!" breathed the Girl with the Wistful Eyes.

"We rescued her just in time. An hour more and we should have been too late, I fear. She was very despondent when we found her, and I'm afraid she was contemplating sui—"

The girl, as if dreading to hear his thoughts, ruthlessly interrupted:

"How did you know she was here?"

"One of the Chinamen—Lung Nom Quong—told us."

"By George!" said Tom, unfolding the piece of dirty paper. "I'll bet he's the one who gave me this. Is that the address of your mission, Doctor?"

The "doctor" held the bit of paper beneath the dancing gas flame and nodded affirmatively.

"Yes. He's not a bad sort—Lung Quong. He was trying to do the decent thing."

"Then why," asked Tom, sorely perplexed, "did he try to murder me?"

Reverend Webb looked up, surprised.

"He attacked you after giving you this paper!"

Tom narrated briefly his encounter at the foot of the stairs, and when he was done the little minister shook his head in a slow, bewildered fashion.

"They're a queer lot—Chinamen. Full of mystery and strange ways. Maybe he thought you

Continued on Page 50

Tul

All lines facing speed of the prod ranks of may have fr those at the facing new sponsibilities form the h under the fr German g million pous January. P losses, meet in quantile The probl culties re of housing, fact that d competitor what minor still merit us discuss I consider permitting. The food v inferior to ter in th qualities that those consider ti sure of n pels them substitute, to the det health and being of t ple who a in these b be expect product i pete with low-grade since All reputations very littl of goods, will hardl competitio criminati a menace man it m ing but introduct unate n standpoi sumer th producer bound to both cla be hope interests health that thi be with adian m

A

We r culosis that th this pr to and made o the pro disease zones. entire undert could Whe is not should so tha the he is not paying family anima on the were rise o one p enclos nailed large dwell did n benes repli the l 'em