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The Street of Tombs

One of Its Mysteries Revealed

By CLARISSA MACKIE

Tom Newell pointed down the dark, tortuous street of the old Chinese city. "That? My dear boy, you don't want to stroll through the Street of Tombs, do you?"

"Why not?" demanded Rex Forbes.

"It looks promising as Chinese streets go."

"Promising? Ye gods!" groaned Newell, with disgust.

"Fascinating, then," laughed the other. "Has all the earmarks of oriental mystery; smells to heaven; is filthy, dark; has a name that bespeaks murder lurking around every corner, and all that, you know."

While Newell hesitated Rex laughed again and clapped a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Not afraid of it, are you?" he glibly asked.

"After living in China for five years?"

"I have a decent respect for a few of her unexplained mysteries," finished Newell quickly, "and, believe me, Rex, this is one of them."

"Tell me about it."

"I'll tell you after dinner. Then if you still want to walk through the Street of Tombs I'll swallow my objections and go with you," replied Newell.

"Done," agreed Forbes. And, returning to the city gate, they entered the rickshaws that had been waiting there and were soon bowling along the bund toward the modern city of Shanghai.

It was after dinner at the club that Forbes claimed the promised story.

Tom Newell lit a cigar and puffed thoughtfully before he spoke.

"Two years ago I had a friend, Enderby. You may remember that I frequently mentioned his name in my letters to you. He was the agent for a well known American invention, and he was well liked by the American colony here. Only one thing was against him. He was fond of prowling around the native city yonder, and you know that it is not considered good form here in the model settlement."

"What happened?" asked Forbes curiously.

"Nobody knows—at least none of his friends in Shanghai nor anywhere else. One day he asked me to go into the old city with him to see some porcelain that were said to date from the Ming dynasty. He was going to invest in them if they were the real thing."

"I went with him, for I liked Enderby, in spite of his crudities. He typified my own fast growing, ambitious young country. I inspected the porcelain in a dim shop that looked like a thieves' den, and I discovered that they were all dummy counterfeits. I broke the news to Enderby, and he laughed and said, 'Better luck next time.'"

"On our way back to the city gate—the very gate through which we emerged today, Rex—Enderby passed on that corner of the Street of Tombs and asked me to wait for him, as he had a little errand to do down there."

"I asked him if he knew how the street had gained its name—that it was said that hundreds of men had entered it never to emerge at the other end or to return. They vanished completely, and because of their vanishing and the mystery surrounding their disappearance the street was known as the Street of Tombs."

Unwary foreigners, attracted by the wonderful sight of the large rock crystal ball, had gazed upon it to become hypnotized and thus rendered themselves easy victims to robbery and murder. The slimy creeks that bounded the walls of the old city and the rushing river into which they flowed would hide the evidences of crime.

Suddenly a whisper floated down to them from the closed balcony above.

"Beware, Newell! Beat it! Beat it, man!" And with the warning words there sounded a cry as if the speaker had been attacked; then shutters broke open, the trail balcony tottered under the weight of a man's heavy body, the carved railing snapped and precipitated a man garbed in Chinese clothing into Newell's outstretched arms.

Tom Newell was a giant in stature and strength. One glance in the man's face convinced him that it was the missing Enderby, his once ruddy face ravaged by pain and privation. Then he held Enderby close to his breast, and, dragging at Forbes' hand, he cried fiercely:

"Come, Rex, come! Come with me for your life! The Street of Tombs is opening her arms to you!"

Forbes, partly roused from his apathy, ran on obediently, and after he felt the fresh air in his face he recovered some of his wits. Many doorways behind them belched forth wild-eyed natives, who followed them as far as they dared, for the Street of Tombs bears an evil reputation in its own city and has no wish to air its secrets.

A few scattering shots followed them, but their chain armor was proof against bullets, and soon they came out into the broad street, where a great crowd silently watched them, as if they were witnessing a resurrection from the dead.

Said a peddler of sweetmeats to his neighbor:

"Behold, they entered the Street of Tombs and came forth alive. They bear charmed lives, these foreign devils."

"Some of them do," said his neighbor dryly, for he knew that the Street of Tombs rarely gave up its victims.

When they reached the model settlement with the wounded Enderby, Newell and Forbes listened to a strange story—how Enderby, attracted by the revolving crystal, became hypnotized and was easily captured and set to work in an evil smelling underground room with countless other slaves like himself. It was an opium den, and in connection with it was a silk weaving factory, and it was here that Enderby had labored, trying in vain to escape from his slavery. In time he had proved so faithful that he had been entrusted in the stock room above the shop over the crystal ball, and it was from this vantage point that he had whispered a warning to Newell. Almost instantly he had been stabbed from behind by some secret spy, but he had retained strength to fall crashing through the window to the ground.

One day when he had been nursed back to health and was bidding farewell to his rescuers Enderby turned suddenly grave.

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Street of Tombs, for it must contain many unknown, never to be discovered graves."

Newell lit a fresh cigar, and his eyes stared thoughtfully at the glowing end.

Rex Forbes waited impatiently; then he spoke.

"Well, are you going to tell me that Enderby was murdered?"

"I can't tell you that, for I do not know. I do know that from the instant he vanished around the first turn in the Street of Tombs he dropped out of my life. I never saw him again," Tom Newell's voice was a little unsteady.

"And you could find no trace of him?"

"Not a trace. Four private detectives were sent into the old city."

"And what happened?" interrupted the impatient Forbes.

"They never came back, either," ended Newell.

There fell a long silence between the two men. Newell, an old resident of Shanghai, was thinking of the loss of his friend Enderby. Rex Forbes, fresh from the United States, was eagerly hoping for an opportunity to clear up this mystery of the Street of Tombs.

At last Newell spoke.

"Still want to stroll through the Street of Tombs?" he asked. And he was not surprised at the answer he received.

"Yes," said Forbes doggedly. "I'm going into the Street of Tombs, and I'm going to uncover the mystery of the disappearance of Enderby."

"Very well," agreed Newell. "I am afraid if you are successful you will discover it is a case of sordid murder for Enderby's money and jewelry."

"I'll take a chance on that," retorted the other quickly. "And you—will you come too?"

"Yes," said Newell without hesitation. "You've inspired me with a desire to pierce the mystery of that dark street. We will go together, Rex, but first we will visit a certain armorer out on the Nanking road."

"An automatic revolver would be a handy companion," suggested Forbes.

"I'll lend you one of mine," said Newell. Then, rising and tossing aside his cigar, he added: "We better be off to bed early, for we will have a busy day tomorrow, and it may end in a long rest for both of us. You understand that, Rex?"

"I know it," nodded Forbes grimly. "But I'm thinking of that poor fellow Enderby, and I'll risk it."

The two Americans had chosen broad daylight and plenty of sunshine for their entry into the Street of Tombs.

The end of the street where it debouched upon a wider thoroughfare was a place of busy little shops, but after they had made the first turn in its tortuous windings the street bore a strangely deserted appearance.

Colored signs fluttered above their heads, above the signs were closely shuttered balconies, and still farther up, above the fantastic roof lines, was a sliver of blue sky.

Tom Newell kept his eyes to the right and Rex Forbes watched out on the left hand side of the narrow street as they went slowly along.

Suddenly Forbes stopped before a shop window.

"Jove, Tom, what do you think of that?" he muttered excitedly.

Newell passed beside him and stared at the enormous polished globe of pure rock crystal that revolved dizzily on an ebony pedestal.

Already Red Forbes had been caught by the deadly fascination of that whirling ball. He was hypnotized into rigidity as he stood there.

Fortunately for both of them, Tom Newell was possessed of extraordinary will power, and as soon as he realized what was happening there before his eyes he removed his gaze from the ball, and as he did so there seemed to be revealed to him in one enlightening flash the mystery of the Street of Tombs.

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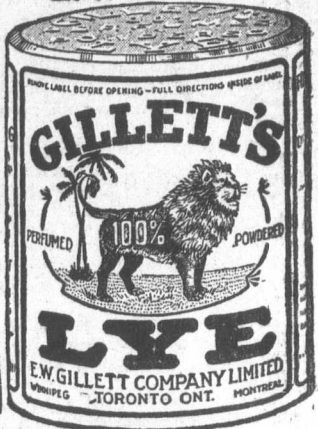
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