

12. MIDNIGHT IN THE CITY OF LIGHT

I awoke to thoughts of Kara. I felt remorse for my actions... even more so because I was genuinely attracted to Greba. The emotional distance I sensed between us last night before we made love had become a permanent barrier upon waking in one another's arms. I am a poor conversationalist at the best of times and this was certainly not one of them.

It appeared I had failed some sort of test by initiating the release that we both so ardently desired. Consequently, Greba had little more to say to me and certainly showed no interest in demonstrating anything approaching affection. Perhaps it would have been different had I pledged my love to her afterwards, but we both knew she could never mean as much to me as Kara regardless of what had happened.

We retreated to separate hotel rooms that day, albeit across the hall from one another. I sat in my room and stared at the blank sheet of paper in front of me. There was much I had yet to commit to print of our recent exploits with the Si-Fan, but as the hours ticked by, the sheet of paper remained pure and unblemished, unspoiled by my vile hands.

Where had I gone wrong? I had always been a sensible lad and certainly not one to be made a fool of by every pretty face that happened by. I had maintained a respect-able practice before Nayland turned up again after all those years away. It was as if I was finally given a second chance to enjoy what I had missed during my childhood.

My father may have been a great man, but it certainly wasn't easy being his son. All of his passion and enjoyment were wrapped up in a mummy's tomb. I tried to immerse myself in his texts when I could, but invariably I was just in his way. It was far easier to ship me off to school than to deal with a motherless boy. It was far simpler for me to pretend both my parents were dead.

Smith had always been the model schoolboy. Studious and athletic, there was little doubt he was destined to achieve greatness. Now nearly three years had passed since he had burst back into my life bringing excitement and danger with him at every turn. I had loved every thrilling second spent by his side, but in the end, I was just as ill-suited to his way of life as I was to my father's.

Kara was beautiful and I longed to love her as I had no other woman before and yet, I was no hero. I couldn't save her. I may have won her heart, but I couldn't win her freedom. I would be better off returning to Cairo to search for the lost treasures my father loved than to vainly search the world for the treasure I loved but had lost. I knew full well I could never keep hold of either of them for very long.

Smith was right as always, I was better off forgetting Kara. I should follow his example and swear off women. I wasn't a swashbuckler any more than I was a Romeo. I was respectable and it was time to put away my childish dreams and accept myself once and for all before my reputation was beyond salvaging.

That night, I sat alone in my apartment, silent and brooding, and smoked my pipe while I ruminated over the Six Snowmen, Keenan Pethig's tragic fate, and that mysterious prescient dream that was never far from my mind. If Pethig's death was unrelated to the Si-Fan, how did Fu Manchu know to warn me about the poisoned food? Was I mistaken and Greba's life was spared only through a remarkable coincidence?

My father had raised me to be a skeptic and, like him, I was possessed of an inherent distrust of my fellow man and a pronounced disdain for the inexplicable. The one exception in all things was my friendship with Nay-land Smith. I wished he were there to guide me now, to take the responsibility for choosing which path to follow, but he was back in London and I was alone with my actions and naught else to blame for their consequences.

Smith was the best mate I ever had. Our friendship was the only thing he truly believed in, apart from the Crown. I often wished he would welcome some fleeting female companionship to relieve him, if only temporarily, of the tremendous burden of having dedicated his life to destroying the Si-Fan. Smith never had much use for women despite his rugged good looks. There had been some sort of brief love affair some months back whilst I was in Cairo, but it had ended badly and left Smith even more committed to living a life of solitude.

He mistrusted women as a rule, but chose to keep such thoughts to himself most of the time in deference to my feelings for Kara. I respected him all the more for the restraint he was capable of exercising. A restraint I could never hope to emulate having been a slave to my volatile emotions since adolescence. I could imagine Smith even now, standing in the doorway watching me, knowing my every thought.

“You can’t sleep, can you, Petrie? You keep thinking of that poor blighter, Pethig,” I could hear him say. “You’ll feel better after you’ve met with Greba’s famous Gaston Max. He’ll soon sort everything out.”

“Dr. Fu Manchu has haunted my life like a specter these past few years. Sometimes it’s hard to believe he’s actually a living, breathing person,” I spoke in a soft, quiet voice more to myself than to my imagined companion. “It’s almost comforting to wake up knowing there is one man who is responsible for all that is wrong in the world. Of course, Dr. Fu Manchu is a genius of such mind-boggling magnitude it makes it difficult to muster the strength to carry on fighting against him. If only there were some means of reaching him... of converting him, why, there would be no end to the good he could accomplish.”

“Stop it,” I could hear Smith snap at me. “Fu Manchu wouldn’t stand a chance on our side and we both know it.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why must it be so?”

“He’s a Chinaman, Petrie; he’ll never be anything better. I thought the same as you once, but circumstance demands we set aside Queen Victoria’s lofty idealism and accept the fact that the dreams of that Great Lady whose heart loved all are most emphatically not shared by the vast majority of the Crown’s subjects. We need our villains to play the part of the scapegoat. We hate them for what they reveal about us. They are the sacrificial lamb needed to stave off the darkness within our own souls.”

I knew Smith was right. We were doomed to engage Fu Manchu in battle for no better reason than he was a Chinaman and we were Englishmen. The future I dared to dream for myself meant a life of exile in Cairo where Karamaneh and I would be accepted, albeit begrudgingly, as husband and wife. My beloved England would only offer us the coldest of receptions, as Kara would always be looked upon as a heathen foreigner.

I smiled as Smith’s voice and image faded from my mind and I knew I was very close to total exhaustion. I extinguished the lights after undressing and got under the covers. Despite my weariness, or perhaps because of it, I found myself restless. I lay awake for what seemed like hours thinking of Greba and remembering her touch, the smell of her hair...

I had finally dozed off when a sudden shiver disrupted my slumber. I was instantly alert as though I had received a subconscious warning. From the unexpected chill and the sound of rushing air, I quickly deduced my window was open. I could just make out a shadow-shrouded figure standing next to my bed. As I watched, my brain raced to consider my next move when both of the figure’s arms rose above the shadowy head without a sound. Instinctively, I rolled to the right and slipped off the bed.

There was a noise like rushing wind when a force emanating from the opposite side of the bed pulled the tangle of blankets from my body. Before I could react, the blankets fell to the floor around me, in shreds. Without thinking, I quickly regained my feet and grasped the empty pitcher of water from the night stand and hurled it in the direction of my attacker. An arm was instantly raised in defense and the pitcher clattered harmlessly to the floor. The movement revealed more of my assailant’s silhouetted body and I realized, much to my surprise, that the intruder was a woman!

I darted round the side of the bed and locked both arms about her whilst she was distracted. She snarled savagely and lashed out at me with her feet. I squeezed my arms tighter beneath her heaving chest and tilted myself backwards until she was lifted bodily at least a foot off the ground. The witch leant forward and bit viciously into my forearm while continuing to kick away at any target within reach.

I fell to my knees by the side of the bed after she delivered a particularly vicious blow. She sprung from my arms toward the open window. I steadied myself against a hard, wooden object and grasped what felt like a thick club sticking up from the center of the bed and wrenched it free. It was an axe! She meant to kill me!

I stood to see her disappear out onto the ledge in front of my window. I quickly pulled my pajama bottoms on and followed her, axe in hand. The second I stepped onto the ledge, a dizzying wave of nausea overcame me as the wind pushed me flat against the brickwork. I looked down to the ground far

below, and then out at the sleeping city resting quietly beneath the inky black clouds. I was frozen in the cold night air. Fighting to keep my balance and still my racing heart, I began to edge cautiously along the ledge in the direction that the she-devil had disappeared.

“Look out!”

I reacted to what I swore was a voice calling out a warning to me only to see my would-be assassin crouched down on the ledge at the corner of the building prying loose a crumbling brick. Steadying herself, she pulled back her arm to hurl the masonry at me. I raised the axe in front of my face as a shield, blocking my view of her. The brick struck the axe-head with such force that it nearly succeeded in dislodging me. I stood precariously clinging with one hand to the window pane. I could not get a good look at the woman’s face as the wind blew her hair and robe about, but there could be little doubt that my assailant was none other than Ursula Trelawney!

“I won’t hesitate to use this, Miss Trelawney,” I warned as I hoisted the axe above my head.

She crouched down again and began prying loose a second brick in response to my warning when the corner of the ledge began to crumble beneath her feet. I gasped in fear as she scrambled to secure her footing. Frantically, I began edging toward her, desperate to reach her before she fell.

I stretched a hand out to her. She was just out of reach and would not turn her face up to look at mine. I glanced at the still crumbling ledge and tried to calculate how many seconds remained when, suddenly, an ear-splitting shot rang out and she toppled backwards off the ledge. Letting go of my hold, I dived to reach her and found myself falling forward into space.

I had just enough time to shut my eyes and let my muscles relax as I struck the roof of a neighboring building not 12 feet below. I lay there for a few moments until I ascertained that, although badly bruised, no bones were broken. I struggled to my feet and took hold of the axe that had landed just inches from my grasp. The crumpled form not more than ten feet away from me was of the woman who very nearly brought my life to a premature end. She lay on her stomach; I was not sure whether she was still breathing. I made a move toward her when I was grasped by the shoulder from behind.

“Who the Devil?” I cried.

“Non, *mon ami*, I am not the Father of Lies.”

I gasped as a torch snapped on illuminating the unfamiliar face of the man standing behind me.

“Lay down your axe, Englishman. I am no more the criminal than you.”

The speaker was a small-boned Frenchman dressed in an immaculate checked travelling coat. He held a small pistol in his hand, pointed at my chest.

“Monsieur Gaston Max, I presume?” I said.

“It seems you have heard of me, *mon ami*,” he said with a gracious bow. “I am flattered.”

“I am Dr. Petrie. The woman you just murdered was called Ursula Trelawney.”

I gestured with the axe toward where she lay.

“You misjudge me.” The little Frenchman laughed as he replaced the revolver in its holster. He reached for a small cigar from a pack concealed in the breast pocket of his coat and lit it. “Do you really think I would shoot to kill without first giving fair warning? And such a beautiful woman! *Morbleu!* Examine her, Doctor. You will see it was the concrete I shot from under her feet, in my desperation to save your life.”

I cautiously knelt down to her side where she lay, face down on the roof. Placing the axe on the ground next to me, I gingerly turned her over. Gaston Max followed behind me and held the beam of his torch upon her face. I started as I found myself looking not into the unconscious features of Ursula Trelawney, but of Greba Eltham!

“*Eh bien!* This is not your Ursula Trelawney is it, *mon ami?*” Gaston Max asked.

I shook my head no.

“Guided by a good little angel we are tonight,” Gaston Max cried. “*Sapristi!* I know this because the woman before you is none other than my very own client. *Mais oui*, it is clear that she was not in her right mind this night. It is most fortunate you are a light sleeper and I a stealthy tracker. Tell me now that the good Lord does not work in the mysterious ways, eh? Well, *mon ami*, we must get her to the hospital, but first, we must find you some more clothes. You must be freezing in this night air.”

Somewhere nearby, a clock began to toll 12 times in the most remarkable city in the world. Amidst the chimes, I would have sworn that I could hear peals of laughter and the chattering of a marmoset.