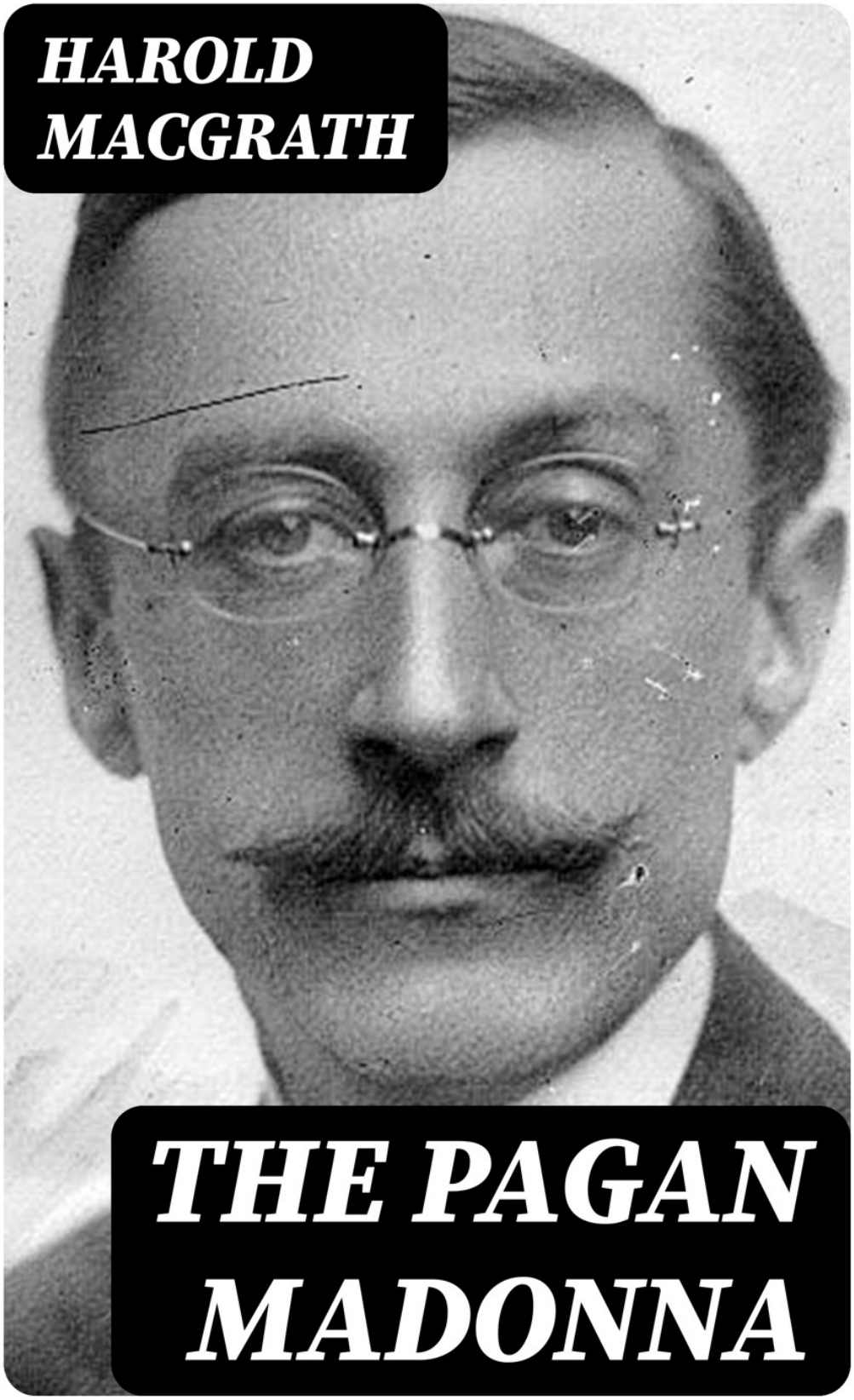
HAROLD MACGRATH



THE PAGAN MADONNA

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Chapter I

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Humdrum isn’t where you live; it’s what you are. Perhaps you are one of those whose lives are bound by neighbourly interests. Imaginatively, you never seek what lies under a gorgeous sunset; you are never stirred by any longing to investigate the ends of rainbows. You are more concerned by what your neighbour does every day than by what he might do if he were suddenly spun, whirled, jolted out of his poky orbit. The blank door of an empty house never intrigues you; you enter blind alleys without thrilling in the least; you hear a cry in the night and impute it to some marauding tom. Lord, what a life!

And yet every move you make is governed by Chance—the Blind Madonna of the Pagan, as that great adventurer, Stevenson, called it. You never stop to consider that it is only by chance that you leave home and arrive at the office alive—millions and millions of you—poor old stick-in-the-muds! Because this or that hasn’t happened to you, you can’t be made to believe that it might have happened to someone else. What’s a wood fire to you but a shin warmer? And how you hate to walk alone! So sheer off—this is not for you.

But to you, fenced in by circumstance, walls of breathless brick and stone, suffocating with longing, you whose thought springs ever toward the gorgeous sunset and the ends of rainbows; who fly in dreams across the golden south seas to the far countries, you whose imagination transforms every ratty old square-rigger that pokes down the bay into a Spanish galleon—come with me.

For to admire an’ for to see,
For to be’old this world so wide.

First off, Ling Foo, of Woosung Road, perhaps the most bewildered Chinaman in all Shanghai last April. The Blind Madonna flung him into a great game and immediately cast him out of it, giving him never an inkling of what the game was about and leaving him buffeted by the four winds of wonder.

A drama—he was sure of that—had rolled up, touched him icily if slightly, and receded, like a wave on the beach, without his knowing in the least what had energized it in his direction. During lulls, for years to come, Ling Foo’s consciousness would strive to press behind the wall for a key to the riddle; for years to come he would be searching the International Bund, Nanking Road, Broadway and Bubbling Well roads for the young woman with the wonderful ruddy hair and the man who walked with the sluing lurch.

Ah, but that man—the face of him, beautiful as that of a foreign boy’s, now young, now old, as though a cobweb shifted to and fro across it! The fire in those dark eyes and the silk on that tongue! Always that face would haunt him, because it should not have been a man’s but a woman’s. Ling Foo could not go to his gods for comparisons, for a million variations of Buddha offered no such countenance; so his recollection would always be tinged with a restless sense of dissatisfaction.

There were other faces in the picture, but with the exception of the woman’s and the man’s he could not reassemble the features of any.

A wild and bitter night. The nor’easter, packed with a cold, penetrating rain, beat down from the Yellow Sea, its

insensate fury clearing the highways of all save belated labourers and ’ricksha boys. Along the Chinese Bund the sampans huddled even more closely together, and rocked and creaked and complained. The inscrutable countenance of the average Chinaman is the result of five thousand years of misery. It was a night for hand warmers—little jigsawed brass receptacles filled with smoldering punk or charcoal, which you carried in your sleeves and hugged if you happened to be a Chinaman, as Ling Foo was.

He was a merchant. He sold furs, curios, table linen, embroideries. His shop was out on the Woosung Road. He did not sit on his stool or in his alcove and wait for customers. He made packs of his merchandise and canvassed the hotels in the morning, from floor to floor, from room to room. His curios, however, he left in the shop. That was his lure to bring his hotel customers round in the afternoon, when there were generally additional profits and no commissions. This, of course, had been the *modus operandi* in the happy days before 1914, when white men began the slaughter of white men. Nowadays Ling Foo was off to the Astor House the moment he had news of a ship dropping anchor off the bar twelve miles down the Whangpoo River. The hour no longer mattered; the point was to beat his competitors to the market—and often there was no market.

He did not call the white people foreign devils; he called them customers. That they worshipped a bearded Buddha was no concern of his. Born in the modern town, having spent twelve years in San Francisco, he was not heavily barnacled with tradition. He was shrewd, a suave bargainer, and as honest as the day is long. His English was fluent.

To-night he was angry with the fates. The ship was hours late. Moreover, it was a British transport, dropping down

from Vladivostok. He would be wasting his time to wait for such passengers as came ashore. They would be tired and hungry and uncomfortable. So at seven o’clock he lit a piece of punk, dropped it into his hand warmer, threw his pack over his shoulders, and left the cheery lobby of the hotel where he had been waiting since five in the afternoon. He would be cold and wet and hungry when he reached his shop.

Outside he called to a disconsolate ’ricksha boy, and a moment later rattled across the bridge that spans the Soochow Creek. Even the Sikh policeman had taken to cover. When he finally arrived home he was drenched from his cap button to the wooden soles of his shoes. He unlocked the shop door, entered, flung the pack on the floor, and turned on the electric light. Twenty minutes later he was in dry clothes; hot rice, bean curd, and tea were warming him; and he sat cross-legged in a little alcove behind his till, smoking his metal pipe. Two or three puffs, then he would empty the ash in a brass bowl. He repeated this action half a dozen times. He was emptying the ash for the last time when the door opened violently and a man lurched in, hatless and apparently drunk—a white man.

But instantly Ling Foo saw that the man was not drunk. Blood was streaming down his face, which was gray with terror and agony. The man made a desperate effort to save himself from falling, and dragged a pile of embroidered jackets to the floor as he went down.

Ling Foo did not stir. It was not possible for him to move. The suddenness of the spectacle had disconnected thought from action. He saw all this, memorized it, even speculated upon it; but he could not move.

The door was still open. The rain slanted across the black oblong space. He saw it strike the windows, pause, then

trickle down. He could not see what had become of the man; the counter intervened. A tingle ran through Ling Foo's body, and he knew that his brain had gained control of his body again. But before this brain could telegraph to his legs three men rushed into the shop. A bubble of sound came into Ling Foo's throat—one of those calls for help that fear smothers.

The three men disappeared instantly below the counter rim. Silence, except for the voices of the rain and the wind. Ling Foo, tensely, even painfully alive now, waited. He was afraid, and it was perfectly logical fear. Perhaps they had not noticed him in the alcove. So he waited for this fantastic drama to end.

The three men rose in unison. Ling Foo saw that they were carrying the fourth between them. The man who carried the head and shoulders of the victim—for Ling Foo was now certain that murder was abroad—limped oddly, with a heave and a sluing twist. Ling Foo slid off his cushion and stepped round the counter in time to see the night absorb the back of the man who limped. He tried to recall the face of the man, but could not. His initial terror had drawn for him three white patches where faces should have been.

For several minutes Ling Foo stared at the oblong blackness; then with a hysterical gurgle he ran to the door, slammed and bolted it, and leaned against the jamb, sick and faint, yet oddly relieved. He would not now have to account to the police for the body of an unknown white man.

A queer business. Nothing exciting ever happened along this part of Woosung Road. What he had witnessed—it still wasn't quite believable—belonged to the water front. Things happened there, for these white sailors were a wild lot.

When the vertigo went out of his legs, Ling Foo cat-stepped over to the scattered embroidered jackets and began mechanically to replace them on the counter—all but two, for these were speckled with blood. He contemplated them for a space, and at last picked them up daintily and tossed them into a far corner. When the blood dried he would wash them out himself.

But there was that darkening stain on the floor. That would have to be washed out at once or it would be crying up to him eternally and recasting the tragic picture. So he entered the rear of the shop and summoned his wife. Meekly she obeyed his order and scrubbed the stain. Her beady little black eyes were so tightly lodged in her head that it was not possible for her to elevate her brows in surprise. But she knew that this stain was blood.

Ling Foo solemnly waved her aside when the task was done, and she slip-slapped into the household dungeon out of which she had emerged.

Her lord and master returned to his alcove. Ah, but the pipe was good! He rocked slightly as he smoked. Three pipefuls were reduced to ashes; then he wriggled off the cushion, picked up his cash counter and began slithering the buttons back and forth; not because there were any profits or losses that day, but because it gave a welcome turn to his thoughts.

The storm raged outside. Occasionally he felt the floor shudder. The windows ran thickly with rain. The door rattled. It was as if all objects inanimate were demanding freedom from bolts and nails. With the tip of his long, slender finger Ling Foo moved the buttons. He counted what his profits would be in Manchurian sables; in the two Ming vases that had come in mysteriously from Kiao-chau—German loot

from Peking; counted his former profits in snuff bottles, and so on.

The door rattled furiously.

Ling Foo could consider himself as tolerably wealthy. Some day, when this great turmoil among the whites subsided, he would move to South China and grow little red oranges and melons, and there would be a nook in the gardens where he could sit with the perfume of jasmine swimming over and about his head and the goodly Book of Confucius on his knees.

A thudding sound—that wasn't the wind. Ling Foo looked over his buttons. He saw a human face outside the door; a beautiful boy's face—white. That was the first impression. But as he stared he saw a man's fury destroy the boyish stamp—gestures that demanded admission.

But Ling Foo shook his head with equal emphasis. He would not go near that door again this night.

The man outside shook his fists threateningly, wheeled, and strode off. Three strides took him out of sight; but Ling Foo, with a damp little chill on his spine, remarked that the visitor limped.

So! This would be the man who had carried the bloody head and shoulders of the unknown.

Oriental curiosity blazed up and over Ling Foo's distaste. What was it all about? Why had the limping man returned and demanded entrance? What had they done with the body? Pearls! The thought struck him as a blow. He began to understand something of the episode. Pearls! The beaten man had heard that sometimes Ling Foo of Woosung Road dealt in pearls without being overcurious. A falling out among thieves, and one had tried to betray his confederates, paying grimly for it. Pearls!

He trotted down to the door and peered into the night, but he could see nothing. He wished now that he had purchased those window curtains such as the white merchants used over on the Bund. Every move he made could be seen from across the way, and the man who limped might be lurking there, watching.

The man had come to him with pearls, but he had not been quick enough. What had he done with them? The man with the slue-foot would not have returned had he found the pearls on his moribund partner. That was sound reasoning. Ling Foo's heart contracted, then expanded and began to beat like a bird's wing. In here somewhere—on the floor!

He turned away from the door without haste. His Oriental mind worked quickly and smoothly. He would tramp back and forth the length of the shop as if musing, but neither nook nor crevice should escape his eye. He was heir to these pearls. Slue-Foot—for so Ling Foo named his visitor—would not dare molest him, since he, Ling Foo, could go to the authorities and state that murder had been done. Those tiger eyes in a boy's face! His spine grew cold.

Nevertheless, he set about his game. With his hands in his sleeves, his chin down, he paced the passage between the two counters. As he turned for the fifth journey a red-and-blue flash struck his eye. The flash came from the far corner of the shop, from the foot of the gunpowder-blue temple vase. Diamonds—not pearls but diamonds! Russian loot!

Ling Foo pressed down his excitement and slowly approached the vase. A necklace! He gave the object a slight kick, which sent it rattling toward the door to the rear. He resumed his pacing. Each time he reached the necklace he gave it another kick. At length the necklace was at the threshold. Ling Foo approached the light and shut it off.

Next he opened the door and kicked the necklace across the threshold. Diamonds—thirty or forty of them on a string.

The room in the rear was divided into workshop and storeroom. The living rooms were above. His wife was squatted on the floor in an unlittered corner mending a ceremonial robe of his. She was always in this room at night when Ling Foo was in the shop.

He ignored her and carried his prize to a lapidary's bench. He perched himself on a stool and reached for his magnifying glass. A queer little hiss broke through his lips. Cut-glass beads, patently Occidental, and here in Shanghai practically worthless!

In his passion of disappointment he executed a gesture as if to hurl the beads to the floor, but let his arm sink slowly. He had made a mistake. These beads had not brought tragedy in and out of his shop. Somehow he had missed the object; some nook or corner had escaped him. In the morning he would examine every inch of the floor. White men did not kill each other for a string of glass beads.

He stirred the beads about on his palm, and presently swung them under the droplight. Beautifully cut, small and large beads alternating, and on the smaller a graven letter he could not decipher. He observed some dark specks, and scrutinized them under the magnifying glass. Blood! His Oriental mind groped hopelessly. Blood! He could make nothing of it. A murderous quarrel over such as these!

For a long time Ling Foo sat on his stool, the image of Buddha contemplating the way. Outside the storm carried on vigorously, sending rattles into casements and shudders into doors. The wifely needle, a thread of silver fire, shuttled back and forth in the heavy brocade silk.

Glass beads! Trumpery! Ling Foo slid off the stool and shuffled back into the shop for his metal pipe.

Having pushed Ling Foo into this blind alley, out of which he was shortly to emerge, none the wiser, the Pagan Madonna swooped down upon the young woman with the ruddy hair and touched her with the impelling finger.

Chapter II

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It was chance that brought Jane Norman into Shanghai. The British transport, bound from Vladivostok to Hong-Kong, was destined to swing on her mudhook forty-eight hours. So Jane, a Red Cross nurse, relieved and on the first leg of the journey home to the United States, decided to spend those forty-eight hours in Shanghai, see the sights and do a little shopping. Besides, she had seen nothing of China. On the way over, fourteen months since, she had come direct from San Francisco to the Russian port.

Jane was one of those suffocating adventurers whom circumstance had fenced in. In fancy she beat her hands against the bars of this cage that had no door, but through which she could see the caravans of dreams. Sea room and sky room were the want of her, and no matter which way she turned—bars. Her soul craved colour, distances, mountain peaks; and about all she had ever seen were the white walls of hospital wards. It is not adventure to tend the sick, to bind up wounds, to cheer the convalescing; it is a dull if angelic business.

In her heart of hearts Jane knew that she had accepted the hardships of the Siberian campaign with the secret hope that some adventure might befall her—only to learn that her inexorable cage had travelled along with her. Understand, this longing was not the outcome of romantical reading; it was in the marrow of her—inherent. She was not in search of Prince Charming. She rarely thought of love as other young women think of it. She had not written in her mind any particular event she wanted to happen; but she knew

that there must be colour, distance, mountain peaks. A few days of tremendous excitement; and then she acknowledged that she would be quite ready to return to the old monotonous orbit.

The Great War to Jane had not been romance and adventure; her imagination, lively enough in other directions, had not falsely coloured the stupendous crime. She had accepted it instantly for what it was—pain, horror, death, hunger, and pestilence. She saw it as the genius of Vasili Vereshchagin and Émile Zola had seen it.

The pioneer—after all, what was it he was truly seeking? Freedom! And as soon as ever civilization caught up with him he moved on. Without understanding it, that was really all Jane wanted—freedom. Freedom from genteel poverty, freedom from the white walls of hospitals, freedom from exactly measured hours. Twenty four hours a day, all her own; that was what she wanted; twenty-four hours a day to do with as she pleased—to sleep in, play, laugh, sing, love in. Pioneers, explorers, adventurers—what else do they seek? Twenty-four hours a day, all their own!

At half after eight—about the time Ling Foo slid off his stool—the tender from the transport sloshed up to the customs jetty and landed Jane, a lone woman among a score of officers of various nationalities. But it really wasn’t the customs jetty her foot touched; it was the outer rim of the whirligig.

Some officer had found an extra slicker for her and an umbrella. Possibly the officer in olive drab who assisted her to the nearest covered ’ricksha and directed the placement of her luggage.

“China!”

“Yes, ma’am. Mandarin coats and oranges, jade and jasmine, Pekingese and red chow dogs.”

“Oh, I don’t mean that kind!” she interrupted. “I should think these poor ’ricksha boys would die of exposure.”

“Manchus are the toughest human beings on earth. I’ll see you in the morning?”

“That depends,” she answered, “upon the sun. If it rains I shall lie abed all day. A real bed! Honour bright, I’ve often wondered if I should ever see one again. Fourteen months in that awful world up there! Siberia!”

“You’re a plucky woman.”

“Somebody had to go. Armenia or Siberia, it was all the same to me if I could help.” She held out her hand. “Good-night, captain. Thank you for all your kindness to me. Ten o’clock, if it is sunshiny. You’re to show me the shops. Oh, if I were only rich!”

“And what would you do if you had riches?”

“I’d buy all the silk at Kai Fook’s—isn’t that the name?—and roll myself up in it like a cocoon.”

The man laughed. He understood. A touch of luxury, after all these indescribable months of dirt and disease, rain and snow and ice, among a people who lived like animals, who had the intelligence of animals. When he spoke the officer’s voice was singularly grave:

“These few days have been very happy ones for me. At ten—if the sun shines. Good-night.”

The ’rickshas in a wavering line began to roll along the Bund, which was practically deserted. The lights shone through slanting lattices of rain. Twice automobiles shot past, and Jane resented them. China, the flowery kingdom! She was touched with a little thrill of exultation. But oh, to get home, home! Never again would she long for palaces and servants and all that. The little wooden-frame house and the garden would be paradise enough. The crimson ramblers, the hollyhocks, the bachelor’s-buttons, and the

peonies, the twisted apple tree that never bore more than enough for one pie! Her throat tightened.

She hadn't heard from the mother in two months, but there would be mail at Hong-Kong. Letters and papers from home! Soon she would be in the sitting room recounting her experiences; and the little mother would listen politely, even doubtfully, but very glad to have her back. How odd it was! In the mother the spirit of adventure never reached beyond the garden gate, while in the daughter it had always been keen for the far places. And in her first adventure beyond the gate, how outrageously she had been cheated! She had stepped out of drab and dreary routine only to enter a drabber and drearier one.

What a dear boy this American officer was! He seemed to have been everywhere, up and down the world. He had hunted the white orchid of Borneo; he had gone pearl hunting in the South Seas; and he knew Monte Carlo, London, Paris, Naples, Cairo. But he never spoke of home. She had cleverly led up to it many times in the past month, but always he had unembarrassedly switched the conversation into another channel.

This puzzled her deeply. From the other Americans she never heard of anything but home, and they were all mad to get there. Yet Captain Dennison maintained absolute silence on that topic. Clean shaven, bronzed, tall, and solidly built, clear-eyed, not exactly handsome but engaging—what lay back of the man's peculiar reticence? Being a daughter of Eve, the mystery intrigued her profoundly.

Had he been a professional sailor prior to the war? It seemed to her if that had been the case he would have enlisted in the Navy. He talked like a man who had spent many years on the water; but in labour or in pleasure, he made it most difficult for her to tell. Of his people, of his

past, not Bluebeard’s closet was more firmly shut. Still with a little smile she recalled that eventually a woman had opened that closet door, and hadn’t had her head cut off, either.

He was poor like herself. That much was established. For he had said frankly that when he received his discharge from the Army he would have to dig up a job to get a meal ticket.

Dear, dear! Would she ever see a continuous stretch of sunshine again? How this rain tore into things! Shanghai! Wouldn’t it be fun to have a thousand dollars to fling away on the shops? She wanted jade beads, silks—not the quality the Chinese made for export, but that heavy, shiver stuff that was as strong and shielding as wool—ivory carvings, little bronze Buddhas with prayer scrolls inside of them, embroidered jackets. But why go on? She had less than a hundred, and she would have to carry home gimcracks instead of curios.

They were bobbing over a bridge now, and a little way beyond she saw the lighted windows of the great caravansary, the Astor House. It smacked of old New York, where in a few weeks she would be stepping back into the dull routine of hospital work.

She paid the ricksha boy and ran into the lobby, stamping her feet and shaking the umbrella. The slicker was an overhead affair, and she had to take off her hat to get free. This act tumbled her hair about considerably, and Jane Norman’s hair was her glory. It was the tint of the copper beech, thick, finespun, with intermittent twists that gave it a wavy effect.

Jane was not beautiful; that is, her face was not—it was comely. It was her hair that turned male heads. It was then men took note of her body. She was magnificently healthy,

and true health is a magnet as powerful as that of the true pole. It drew toward her men and women and children. Her eyes were gray and serious; her teeth were white and sound. She was twenty-four.

There was, besides her hair, another thing that was beautiful—her voice. It answered like the G string of an old Strad to every emotion. One could tell instantly when she was merry or sad or serious or angry. She could not hide her emotions any more than she could hide her hair. As a war nurse she had been adored by the wounded men and fought over by the hospital commandants. But few men had dared make love to her. She had that peculiar gift of drawing and repelling without consciousness.

As the Chinese boy got her things together Jane espied the bookstall. American newspapers and American magazines! She packed four or five of each under her arm, nodded to the boy, and followed the manager to the lift! She hoped the lights would hang so that she could lie in bed and read. Her brain was thirsty for a bit of romance.

Humming, she unpacked. She had brought one evening gown, hoping she might have a chance to wear it before it fell apart from disuse. She shook out the wrinkles and hung the gown in the closet. Lavender! She raised a fold of the gown and breathed in rapturously that homy perfume. She sighed. Perhaps she would have to lay away all her dreams in lavender.

A little later she sat before the dressing mirror, combing her hair. How it happened she never could tell, but she heard a crash upon the wood floor, and discovered her hand mirror shattered into a thousand splinters.

Seven years’ bad luck! She laughed. Fate had blundered. The mirror had fallen seven years too late.

Chapter III

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Outside the bar where the Whangpoo empties into the Yang-tse lay the thousand-ton yacht *Wanderer II*, out of New York. She was a sea whippet, and prior to the war her bowsprit had nosed into all the famed harbours of the seven seas. For nearly three years she had been in the auxiliary fleet of the United States Navy. She was still in war paint, owner's choice, but all naval markings had been obliterated. Her deck was flush. The house, pierced by the main companionway, was divided into three sections—a small lounging room, a wireless room, and the captain's cabin, over which stood the bridge and chart house. The single funnel rose between the captain's cabin and the wireless room, and had the rakish tilt of the racer. *Wanderer II* could upon occasion hit it up round twenty-one knots, for all her fifteen years. There was plenty of deck room fore and aft.

The crew's quarters were up in the forepeak. A passage-way divided the cook's galley and the dry stores, then came the dining salon. The main salon, with a fine library, came next. The port side of this salon was cut off into the owner's cabin. The main companionway dropped into the salon, a passage each side giving into the guest cabins. But rarely these days were there any guests on *Wanderer II*.

The rain slashed her deck, drummed on the boat canvas, and blurred the ports. The deck house shed webby sheets of water, now to port, now to starboard. The ladder was down, and a reflector over the platform advertised the fact that either the owner had gone into Shanghai or was expecting a visitor.

All about were rocking lights, yellow and green and red, from warships, tramps, passenger ships, freighters, barges, junks. The water was streaked with shaking lances of colour.

In the salon, under a reading lamp, sat a man whose iron-gray hair was patched with cowlicks. Combs and brushes produced no results, so the owner had had it clipped to a short pompadour. It was the skull of a fighting man, for all that frontally it was marked by a high intellectuality. This sort of head generally gives the possessor yachts like *Wanderer II*, tremendous bank accounts; the type that will always possess these things, despite the howl of the proletariat.

The face was sunburned. There was some loose flesh under the jaws. The nose was thick and pudgy, wide in the nostrils, like a lion's. The predatory are not invariably hawk-nosed. The eyes were blue—in repose, a warm blue—and there were feathery wrinkles at the corners which suggested that the toll-taker could laugh occasionally. The lips were straight and thin, the chin square—stubborn rather than relentless. A lonely man who was rarely lonesome.

His body was big. One has to be keen physically as well as mentally to make a real success of anything. His score might have tallied sixty. He was at the peak of life, but hanging there, you might say. To-morrow Anthony Cleigh might begin the quick downward journey.

He had made his money in mines, rails, ships; and now he was spending it prodigally. Prodigally, yes, but with caution and foresight. There was always a ready market for what he bought. If he paid a hundred thousand for a Rembrandt, rest assured he knew where he could dispose of it for the same amount. Cleigh was a collector by instinct. With him it was no fad; it was a passion, sometimes absurd. This artistic love of rare and beautiful creations was innate,