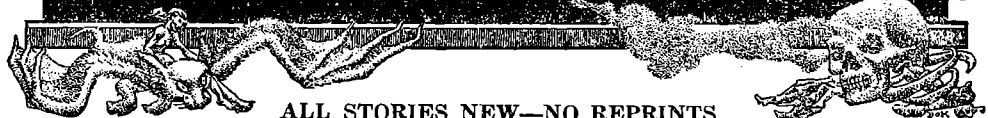


# Weird Tales



MAY, 1941

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(In two parts—part I)

*The Finest and Most Thrilling Novel Ever Written by the World's Acknowledged Master of the Weird Tale.*

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

H. AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.

"She turned her face to his, and the tears glistened like star dust."



# By What Mystic Mooring

By FRANK OWEN

*The fog is on Yesterday's edge—for Time ceases when the mists begin.*

**T**HE morning had been dull, dreary. In Buitenzorg, all activity ceased. It was a moment of languor, of repose. The usual strident voices of the surrounding forests were sup-

pressed, as though nature had ended her song on a high note of which but a faint echo remained. Over the Javanese city, a fog was slowly descending, a strange fog that shimmered and glowed with a thou-

sand fantastic designs. It brought a cessation of stillness, for now in the weird white-yellow glow there were voices, whispering, murmuring, as though people were speaking in the distance.

Alan Wedmore sat in a corner of a cafe, gazing through the open window on a city slowly changing into a tapestry in which the figures were blurred, grotesque, occasionally formless. The air was intensely oppressive. It was difficult to breathe. Wedmore had had a touch of fever and his head was still heavy. Nevertheless he surveyed the scene curiously as the monstrous fog wove its way like a serpent through the streets and alleys of the city.

Abruptly his thoughts were diverted as he noticed that seated opposite to him at the table was a Chinese whose face suggested great age, for it was bronzed and lined as though it had been left out in the rain all night and become rusted. But then he was in an amiable mood for he had had many brandies. His spirits were bubbling over.

"Welcome," he said cordially, "whoever you are. What do you think of our tapestries?"

As he spoke he pointed toward the fog.

"It is well that you appreciate them," said the stranger. His voice was low, yet each word fell upon the air full-born, an odd voice that showed vast training in the elegant winding paths of conversation.

"Tapestries," chuckled Wedmore, "not by Gobelins but goblins."

"By many words wit is exhausted."

"But I have said very few."

"Words whispered on earth sound like thunder in heaven."

There was something ominous in the stranger's tone, though perhaps it was only because of the sinister glowing fog that had climbed to the window ledge and was drifting into the cafe. It had a sobering effect on Wedmore. A man cannot afford to give himself over to the joys of intoxica-

tion when he is in danger. He stifled the thought as soon as it sprang up, but it refused to be vanquished. He gazed intently at the face of his companion which despite the suggestion of great age, mirrored an expression as tranquil and contented as that of a child. Soundlessly he had come as though on the wings of the fog. Wedmore shivered as he gazed into the gaunt face. The eyes were deep sunken but glowing with light, at strange variance to the brownish ivory texture of the skin. Although Wedmore had never met the man before, about him there was a vague familiar something, an intangible essence that suggested they were not entirely strangers.

"My name is Feng Yen," he said. "I was anxious for companionship. I saw you alone at this table; and decided to rest here a moment. I trust I have not disturbed you."

"Not at all," said Wedmore quickly. Momentarily his misgivings were stayed. The voice had a charming quality, an undercurrent of sincerity. "I am glad to have company. This fog is uncanny. It seems to emphasize the fact that a man is always alone even when there are many people surging about him."

And Feng Yen said, "Each man of earth leads a hermit's life in the little world which he builds around himself. No outsider, even though he be an older brother, is able to enter. As for the fog, I find it pleasant."

"It changes the whole city," declared Wedmore. "It repaints the houses and alters the shape of familiar objects. It turns Buitenzorg into a ghost city."

"This fog," Feng Yen said slowly, "is on yesterday's edge. Hidden within it is the city that used to be here, or rather the many cities that have been built through the ages one upon the other. So many billions of people have died since the earth cooled from molten intensity, that there is

scarcely a bit of dust anywhere that was not at one time or other part of human flesh.

"A century ago there was a quaint street called Spice Lane that started only a few hundred feet from where this tavern now stands. Shall we explore it together?"

"But that was a centry ago!" Wedmore ejaculated. He tried to smile but the muscles of his face refused to function.

"Time ceases when the mists begin."

Wedmore rose to his feet. He felt very old.

"I will go with you," he said.

"That is well. Together we will set out on a gentle journey. May no tiger stop our path."

Feng Yen led the way from the cafe into a fog-drenched soundless street, peopled by figures as formless as clay.

"After a typhoon, there are pears to gather. In a fog there are even greater riches."

**I**NTO Spice Lane they walked. Wedmore was puzzled at this strange new street that was nobody knows how old, yet it had not been there at dawn. His flesh felt as though it were creeping along the bones, intent on evading the fear that was but a moment away. Nevertheless at least now the air was not so stifling and he could breathe more easily.

Feng Yen strode along at a great pace, though without effort. His eyes glowed like lanterns in the mist.

"Fogs," he murmured, "are given people to efface reality. Have you a revolver?"

"No," Wedmore replied, surprised at the abruptness of the interrogation.

"Most regrettable."

"Why? Are we in danger?"

"One is always in danger who walks close to life. Have you a knife?"

"Yes."

"Sharp?"

"Quite." Alan Wedmore handed him

the knife. "For what purpose do you need it?"

"That I may kill a man."

"I'll have no part in it!"

"Be not disturbed. You have nothing to fear, for the man I am about to kill is Gat Neber who lived in Singapore more than a hundred years ago. In the flush of his youth, there was a day when the fog descended on Singapore as it did today on Buitenzorg. Then, too, I walked back into the mortal world, for fogs bridge reality. At a tavern I stopped for a cup of wine. And there I met Gat Neber. We drank together, and as we drank we grew friendly. In an excess of confidence I told him about my daughter, Kim, she who is as slim and graceful as a young elm and with eyes of such dark lustre the stars weep in envy. Gat Neber listened to my words as though bound by a spell, the spell of the enchanting Kim whom the world knows of only in legend. He begged me to take him back with me through the streets where the mists begin. I had drunk too much wine. My guard was weakened and I grew careless. Yes, I agreed to take him with me, but I should have waited before doing so till the Yellow River runs clear. Long have I regretted that I did not show him only the whites of my eyes. Far better would it have been, had I permitted gentle Kim to dwell in peaceful obscurity. As it was I took destruction back to her. She who had always been guarded so carefully suddenly found herself in a position as unenviable as though she had been into the market place where all men might bid for her services. She gazed at Gat Neber and was captivated. He belonged to a different age, a different world. She was confounded by the mystery that hung about him. In the days that followed awe turned to adoration. To Kim, that day a god arrived. In despair, I turned away and wept and my tears were red with anguish. Nevertheless Kim was happy,

happier than she had ever been since her escape from life. Gat Neber, also, seemed to be enthralled. He bowed down before her as though in worship. Where the mists begin, time ceases to be, an hour, a day, a year, are all one. But as time is measured in Singapore they dwelt together through a thousand moons. Then gradually Gat Neber began to long for his accustomed life in Singapore. He turned away from Kim, plotting to escape from a land that was in itself the most complete escape whereof anyone might dream. At last the opportunity came and he fled back into the world of men, into the world of bleak reality where so little, if any, peace exists. We Chinese through countless centuries on earth practiced the great art of tranquillity, to be at peace with all, and with all at peace.

"It became infused into the blood of my people and so they are able to withstand endless onslaughts of drought, plague, treachery and oppression. Men marvel at their staying qualities. Few realize that in the make-up of the Chinese there is the something more that makes them great among all people. Kim took the news of Gat Neber's desertion stoically but she commenced to droop like a flower. All grandeur had departed from her life. Do you wonder that I, too, grieved? For the fault was mine. I had attempted to permit two worlds to blend in a supreme romance that was worthy of the gods. But Gat Neber was a mortal. He could not vision the wide sweep and glory of an eternal love. And so he went back to Singapore. For he was like a bit of raw, untempered steel, untested, undependable, untrue. But why should I engulf you in torrents of words?"

"Go on," said Alan Wedmore curtly.

"I must," Feng Yen said. "I had no intention of stopping though the amenities of culture make it necessary for me to appear apologetic for my assumption."

"Go on," Wedmore said once more, though scarcely conscious that he did so.

"That is why we are going to Singapore, to kill Gat Neber, so that he will return to the mists again, this time without vain longings or regret."

Wedmore made no protest to the contemplated slaying but his brain worked nimbly. He must do something to prevent its consummation. Surely the opportunity would come. Mere words of objection seemed pitifully futile.

WHILE Feng Yen had been speaking, they had been walking through the leisurely winding, twisting path of Spice Lane. The air was heavy with a hundred blended fragrances. Here every spice of the Indies was offered for sale but no one seemed intent upon buying nor did the shadowy figures of shopkeepers seem concerned. Over all hung a heavy lassitude as though it were part of the texture of that shimmering, glowing, faintly colorful mist.

And now they stopped before a door that opened into the dark, flavorful hall of a house. They groped their way along until there came a sudden turn, abruptly the hall widened and took on a measure of luxuriousness. The rugs were like moss beneath their feet, and numerous soft-toned lanterns burned to show them the way. Every vestige of the murmuring mists had vanished, a strange hush, as though nature were standing on tiptoe waiting.

And then Kim came to them. At her approach, Alan Wedmore gasped. She was as radiant as the dawn, although her hair was as blue-black as the night sky in which the soft stars sleep. Her figure was beautiful to behold, every soft curve was enchantment. But she seemed ethereal, not a real girl, but a figure of porcelain. Feng Yen had momentarily vanished but Wedmore did not care. All that mattered was

this girl with the warm red lips and eyebrows slanted like the thin moons' edge. He took a step toward her as though to draw her into his arms. But something held him back. Languidly she surveyed him, nor did she seem displeased at his gaze. About the corners of her lips lurked the shadow of a smile. From behind Wedmore, Feng Yen was speaking.

"The chairs are ready to convey us to the quay."

Wedmore offered his arm to Kim. She bowed in acknowledgment and placed her hand upon it. He scarcely breathed so tense was the moment. Of such things are rarest dreams made. Perhaps this, too, was a dream.

And, as though he could read his thoughts, Feng Yen murmured, "All is a dream, earth, sky, the wind in the tree-tops. Nothing exists with any semblance of permanence. We are all but figures on a fan in the hand of some mighty god. He waves the fan and we vanish or return at his will."

"As long as I am here," said Wedmore, "I am contented."

"I am gratified."

Outside, rumors were waiting with sedan chairs. They carried their burdens without effort. Before long they were at the waterfront where a small boat was waiting. Wedmore led Kim to a cabin-like structure where there were silks and cushions of every color and hue, and a subdued blue light as though from a hidden lantern.

Kim seated herself comfortably among the cushions and motioned Wedmore to join her. Almost breathlessly, he acquiesced. He could not have moved more softly if he had been in a temple. Gently Kim swayed toward him. He put out his arm and she nestled comfortably against him. Boatmen came and lifted back the draperies so they could see the sky. The boat was slipping away from its

anchorage. Wedmore could see the figure of Yeng Fen, as immobile as a statue, leaning against the rail wrapped in the cloak of profound meditation. With a start, Wedmore remembered the knife that he had given him. Were they really en route to Singapore to kill a man? The fragrance in the air intensified. The moon, a cool silver scythe, cut for a moment through the mist. Near its tip there was a bright star that glowed like a jewel on the blue velvet breast of the sky. Then the shimmering golden fog closed in again. It was strange to see that moon by day, yet was it day? How long ago it seemed since the fog had crept down over Buitenzorg. But then perhaps it was not so odd either to see the moon for Feng Yen had said "time ceases when the mists begin."

Wedmore turned to Kim and all his fears slipped from him. Surely, this must be a dream. No girl of earth could be as lovely. What more need he of life if he could merely drift "beyond the hills of dream" with the prayer on his lips that the dream might never end. He held her to him, but she made no effort to break away. A sudden breeze rose bringing with it music, music from the sky or the stars. Kim shuddered or was she quivering with ecstasy at the thought that she was bound for Singapore? If all went well, perhaps soon she would be in his arms again. At that moment a hatred sprang up in Wedmore, hatred for Gat Neber and all that he represented, a blind, reasonless hatred that was beyond all reason. It was more than mere jealousy, like a fire consuming him. If Gat Neber were not destroyed, the fire would destroy him. Wedmore bent so that his cheek brushed Kim's hair. Breath of jasmine and wisteria. No net is stronger than the blue black hair of a beloved woman. He smiled as he thought of the sudden death that Keng Yen was carrying to Gat Neber. He had neither misgivings nor regrets. With Gat Neber

dead there would be no one to stand in the way of his pursuit of Kim. Yes, it might not be such a bad idea for Gat Neber to die. If there were no other way for him to possess Kim it must be done. Fortunate it was that he had given Feng Yen the knife. Not for a moment did he worry about his own future, nor did he pause to wonder if he, too, would be fed to a hungry knife. Kim was with him in that purple mist of solitude. Over and over his thoughts repeated themselves, like scribbled pleas in a prayer-wheel. His desire was at such a high pitch he completely overlooked the fact that Feng Yen had declared that he was resolved to snuff out the life of Gat Neber so that thereafter Kim could be with Gat always. Stepping into the country of the mist was like walking beyond the curtain of mortality. In this strange, lovely land he alone was mortal. But he gave this fact no heed. There was nothing to fear, nothing to dread. For only in life is there danger. Now there was nothing but music and soft lights. A great white bird flew gracefully by, Kim was in his arms. And there was nothing but beauty, fragrance and love, and a knife for Gat Neber that would strike swiftly and deep.

As the boat sped on "beauty hung around them like splendor round the moon."

WITH a start, Wedmore realized that Kim was weeping and there was perfume mingled with her tears. She turned her face to his, and the tears glistened like stardust. Almost without being aware of what he was doing, as though he were a puppet with no control over his motivation he drew her close and kissed her lips and it seemed as though time ceased. Her lips were warm and soft and clinging. It was as though he were standing on tiptoe on a mountaintop reaching for the stars. As she drew away, he murmured, "Are you sad?"

"No," she said, "happy. The air is so tremulous with beauty it stirs my emotions so I cannot help weeping. I love the silence."

"So do I, for in silence one may taste the genuine flavor of things."

Feng Yen approached. "We will soon be in Singapore," he said.

"But I thought the trip was an overnight journey on a fast steamer!" Wedmore exclaimed.

"Have I not told you that here time is without measure, and so we give it no regard?"

"I am sorry."

"Not I, for there is work to be done."

At Singapore, to Wedmore's disappointment, only he and Feng Yen disembarked.

"Kim will wait on the boat," Feng Yen explained. "What happens may not be a pretty sight for women."

Despite the fog, Singapore as ever was a busy place, the crossroads of the world that never sleeps. A conglomerate of races bellowed and chanted a torrent of words that became distilled into a mighty symphony.

But Wedmore paid little attention to the wraithlike kaleidoscope that surged about them as they strode along. He was disturbed by a trivial matter that had happened in a world of wonder. Buitenzorg is an hour by train from Weltevreden. It is up in the hills, a cool elysium where the people of Java go to vacation from the sultry sea coast. Its Botanical Gardens are famed the world over, but it is not a port. Yet he and Feng Yen had strolled into Spice Lane, stopped for Kim, and then runners had carried them to the waterfront where they had taken the boat for Singapore. Had the coolies run all the way to Batavia? It seemed impossible, yet apparently they had done so. He made as though to question Feng Yen but caught himself in time.

After all what matter one more unexplainable thing in a world of magic?

Before long they stopped at a crowded cafe. Feng Yen chose a table away from the throngs. A waiter brought them wine, extra large glasses so that they need not order again too quickly. Wedmore sipped his wine and gazed as the light of the lamp overhead fell upon it. The reflection flickered, and swayed until it almost seemed like a girl dancing. He leaned forward. Perhaps it was Kim dancing in the wine even as she was dancing in his thoughts. He paid no heed as Feng Yen slipped away from the table. All that mattered was his thoughts and his dreams. So intent did his gaze become, that the excitement and revelry about him blurred off into space, forgotten.

WHEN somebody bumped the table and the wine was spilled. The spell was broken. He drew his hand across his eyes as though to bring back reality. Stupidly he gazed about him. Then he became conscious of the pandemonium that filled the cafe to bursting point. A hundred men were yelling and gesticulating. Outside a crowd was forming, storming the door and pouring in like a flood. He rose to his feet and grabbed the shoulder of a sailor.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing much," was the laconic reply. "Some bloke carved his friend."

Wedmore fought his way through the mob until he got to a spot where he could see the body of the murdered man. He gazed down in awe. Not for a moment did he doubt that this dead handsome youth was Gat Neber, for on his face there was a serene expression. He seemed almost to be smiling. Somehow Wedmore had no regrets even though it was his knife that was buried in Gat's body. And he knew as he stood there that he had lost Kim forever. Now Gat was with her there was no place for him. He closed his eyes. He must get a grip on himself. And then two arms stole about his body and someone kissed him as gentle and soft as the wind's caress. When he opened his eyes Kim had vanished but the perfume lingered.

Outside, he breathed deeply of the warm air. Now the fog was rising, rolling away in a mystery of light and dancing colors.

He lifted his hand and waved, "Good-by, Kim," he whispered. "I shall be waiting, hoping. Perhaps some day you will come back to me."

With bowed head, he walked slowly back to the harbor front of Singapore. He must begin the long tiresome journey back to Buitenzorg.