

The Whisper

By Robert W. Chambers

As I entered the alley the bells of the dim city tolled for the passing night. Far in the black maze of filthy lanes and mist-choked streets a policeman whistled; I heard the distant din of an Elevated train, rushing through the fog, nearer, nearer, duller now, now smothered in the vapour which rolled from river to river, thick, heavy, stifling.

In the gloom of the alley a shadowy form loomed up and passed, leaving no sound of footsteps in my ears, but all around me the vapour became faintly tainted with opium and a flare of yellow light streamed out across the fog from an opening door. There was a momentary murmur of voices, the soft shuffle of felt-shod feet, the rustle of silken sleeves. A painted paper lantern swung from the doorway, dipped, and disappeared. I heard the deadened slam of the door and the black night veiled my eyes again.

An empty truck, with broken shafts buried in the mud of the gutter, blocked the sidewalk, and I crossed the greasy pavement to avoid it.

Around the pale flame of a gas lamp the fog spun an iridescent oval; the wet sidewalk glimmered underneath. Far down the reeking throat of the alley an arc-light shone like a grey star.

I raised my eyes to the dark house before me where from a rusting balcony a sign hung low above the doorway.

"This was her house," I said aloud to myself; but I passed on to the next house. Here I paused a moment, looking back at the bamboo sign dripping with fog, then turned and descended some wooden steps to an iron door. Before I could find the handle, wrought in bronze like a dragon's claw, the door flew open and I heard McManus' angry bellow; "Git t' hell outer here, yer dope suckin' yap!" and a Chinaman was hustled into the area beside me.

"Chin chin through hattee!" snarled the Chinaman, "walkee where dlam please!"

"I'll walkee you on yer neck!" growled McManus, and kicked the Chinaman half way up the steps.

"Dlam! Dlam! Dlam!" screamed the Chinaman, dancing with rage, but Charley, the bouncer, burst out of the door, and the Chinaman fled chattering like an infuriated ape.

I stepped into the low-ceilinged room and took a chair at a cherry-wood table beside the wall. Two young men sitting there said, "Hello, Jim!"

"Good evenin'," said McManus, leaning over the bar, "did you see me givin' de bounce to Wah-Wo?"

"Yes," I said, "when did he come back?"

"He jest come in. I told him to git an' he give me de ha-ha, so Charley trun him down. What t'hell, sez I, an' he gives me back talk! Say, I won't do a t'ing to him!"

One of the young men at the table beside me looked up from the Welsh-rabbit he was eating and called for ale. McManus brought it himself, a brimming pewter mug, and wiped his hands on his blub apron. Then he bawled for Charley to take my order.

"Sure," said Chancy coming in from the street where he had been patiently waiting for a scrap, and he leaned with both fists on the table and winked pleasantly at the company. Lynde, of the "Herald," advised me to try a rabbit, and Penlow, of the "Tribune," spoke well of the chops, so I left it to Charley and he retired to the grill, whistling, "Oh I don't know!"

"It's a wonder to me," I said, hanging my wet mackintosh on a peg and kicking off my overshoes, "it's a wonder to me that Wah-Wo was discharged."

"There was no evidence to hold him," observed Lynde after a moment's silence.

Penlow lighted his pipe and rattled his mug on the table.

"No evidence," I repeated; "do you fellows doubt that Wah-Wo did it?"

"I suppose he did," said Penlow, "it was my scoop too."

"We may scoop yet," said Lynde, "the man's bound to be caught. What did they do with that young tough from Hell's Kitchen?"

"Sheehan? Oh, his alibi is good," said Penlow. "Mac, fill her up will you?"

McManus replenished the pewter and stood for a moment beside us as if undecided.

"Gents," began McManus, "youse is dead off— excuse me." He shifted his toothpick and rubbed his thumb on the polished bar.

"Wah-Wo ain't in it," he said contemptuously:

"I give him de t'row-down,—fur why?—fur because I don't give de glad hand to no dope suckin' come-on—an' he's dopy. But he didn't do no dirt to the gal whut youse gents was stuck on—he ain't that kind He give me the laugh an' I t'rowed him down, see? An' I won't do a t'ing but push his face in. See?"

"But," said Penlow, "her dog flew at him when he went to the house. Kerrigan, you know— 'Happy Days Mike'—said that Wah-Wo tried to cut a girl in Doyers Street."

"Nit! I don't think," said McManus scornfully: "Kernigan's a stuff—"

"Well, Mac," said Lynde, "what's your theory? You know as much about it as anybody. The girl came in here every night, didn't she? People say that she lived alone, but of course she had company when she wanted it. What's your idea, Mac?"

McManus looked out of the window and drummed on the bar with the blade of his oyster knife. Chanley, clad in a blue checked jumper, arrived with some chops and ale. I unfolded my napkin and began my supper.

For a while I ate in silence, thinking of Wah-Wo and the dead girl.

Caithness of the Consolidated Press came in looking cold and ill, and we hastily made room for him at our table.

"You're sick," said Lynde sharply, "you ought to be in bed."

"I'm all right," said Caithness, glancing at us with his large dark eyes: "Mac, get me something hot."

I swallowed my ale and turned again to the chops, scarcely listening to the hum of voices beside me, for I was thinking again of the dead girl.

I had no doubt that Wah-Wo had killed her. Again and again I had seen his eyes fastened upon her as she sat chatting with us, here at this very table. The motive was clear to me. I had spoken of this to the others but they laughed at me. The District Attorney took no stock in it, either; the result was the discharge of Wah-Wo.

How could anybody but a Chinaman, crazed with jealousy and opium, harm the child? For she was a mere child, this pallid victim whose soul had mounted to the Judgment seat from the filth of Chinatown.

Pale, slim, childish, depraved, she had never haunted Chinese resorts nor, to my knowledge, had she ever touched needle to flame. She had shunned the women of the quarter. I seldom saw her speak to any man except the reporters and newspaper artists who came to McManus's for a midnight chop or rarebit.

Her acquaintance with us had been open and guileless. She chatted with us about our business, discussed the latest police shake-up or the newest Tammany scandal, gave us her views on politics and the City Hall, and glided away into the street again followed by her dog. Her dog! A great hulking brute, black as night, with sombre eyes and low hanging jowl,—a creature silent, unmoved except when she bent her pale face to his ear and whispered. Then and then only he would rise, shuffling from the sawdust floor under the bar, and stalk after her into the night.

He never paid the slightest attention to us. Calls, caresses, threats, left him unmoved.

“What is it you whisper into his ear, Lil?” we often asked, but she would only smile and answer:

“His name.”

And so, as none of us knew his name, we called him simply, “her dog.”

It had been two months now since Lil was found on her bed with a bullet in her heart and the dog lying stolidly across her bare little feet. And after we had clubbed together and buried her, we were kinder to her dog.

Every night he came gravely into McManus’ to lie down under the bar just as he had done when Lil sat there chatting with us.

At first McManus was afraid that the dog would “hoodoo the place,” but he left the silent brute undisturbed, and, after a while, began to grow fond of it.

“That dog ain’t no mutt,” McManus would say as he stood behind the bar opening oysters; “no an’ he ain’t no rube! Say! he’s in it all the time when Chancy trims the steaks.”

As I sat thinking of all these things and sipping my ale meditatively, I heard the iron door creak on its hinges and the knocker fall once. Then something heavy and hairy rubbed its body against the door outside. McManus stood up saying: “Here he comes, gents!”

Her dog entered.

Lynde held out his hand as the brute passed, and Penlow flung a bone on the floor. The dog noticed neither the caress nor the bone, but lay down under the bar and stretched his great limbs across the floor, sighing heavily.

“There is one thing certain,” said Lynde, looking at the dog: “the man who killed the girl was in the habit of visiting her,—and that dog knew him.”

“I also believe the murderer was known to the dog,” said Penlow.

“The murderer,” said Caithness, “was her lover.”

“It is strange,” said I, “that none of us suspects anybody except Wah-Wo.”

“Why strange?” asked Caithness, then he added impatiently, “yes, it is strange! Do you think she would have looked at a Chinaman?”

“The Chinaman looked at her; I saw him,” I replied.

“After all, she was a common girl of the street,” said Penlow unaffectedly, “and I guess pride cut no figure with her.”

“That is where you lie,” said Caithness in a low voice.

There was a dead silence. Then Penlow said: “Did I understand you, Caithness?”

I rose and laid my hand on Penlow’s arm, which was twitching though his face was calm.

“Are you crazy?” I said to Caithness.

“I think I am,” said Caithness slowly, “I beg your pardon, Penlow.”

Lynde turned his puzzled eyes from Penlow to Caithness and lifted his mug mechanically. Penlow straightened in his chair but said nothing, and I leaned back motioning McManus to remove the covers.

After a few moments the constraint became irksome. “Red,” the tortoise-shell cat, mascotte of McManus and exterminator of mice by special appointment, had cornered a vicious rat in the backyard, and now came marching in to display the game for our benefit.

“Git!” said McManus with pardonable pride, “the gents here don’t give a damn fur to see rats.”

Charley hustled the cat out again and McManus assured us for the hundredth time that “Red” was the only cross-eyed cat in New York.

None of us had ever before seen a cross-eyed cat, so we did not deny it, although I remonstrated with McManus concerning his pride in “Red’s” ocular misfortune.

“What’s that?” demanded McManus.

“I don’t see why,” said I, “a cat should be the more valuable because it happens to be afflicted with strabismus.”

“Sure!” said McManus doggedly.

“No, I don’t,” I repeated.

“It’s a mascot,” said McManus.

“How do you know?”

“Did youse gents ever see another cross-eyed cat?” demanded McManus hotly.

We all said no.

“Then what t’hell do youse gents know about mascots?” he exclaimed triumphantly.

The constraint still weighed upon us, however, for Caithness had neither spoken nor smiled, and Penlow, it was easy to see, had not forgotten.

Lynde picked up a paper and ran it through, unaffectedly searching for his own matter; after a while Penlow did the same.

I looked at Caithness, and he felt my eyes, for presently he moved a little and passed his hand over his sunken cheeks.

“What’s up?” I asked, dropping my voice and bending toward him.

“Nothing—why?”

“You look like the last rose of summer,—you’ve got a beastly cough.”

He smiled faintly. “It’s consumption,” he said, “I found out to-day.”

I stared at him stupidly.

“I don’t mind,” he said; “I’m dead sick of the whole business.”

“How do you know it’s consumption?” I asked at length.

“I went to three doctors to make sure; I tell you I don’t care.”

Little Penlow was listening now; before I could speak again he leaned over and took Caithness’s hand affectionately.

“Brace up, old boy,” he said, “go to California and get well.”

“Of course,” I cried, “you’re a fool to stay in this cursed climate, Caithness!”

I spoke harshly for I was more affected than I cared to show.

“Chuck up your job! Let the Consolidated Press go to the devil!” urged Lynde.

“I have resigned,” said Caithness quietly. A fit of coughing shook him, and he raised his napkin to his lips. He continued, “I thought I’d come around to-night and say good-bye.”

The dog shifted his position under the bar and sighed again. One of the gas jets behind the bar blazed up suddenly; McManus turned it lower, cursing the gas company.

“Do you fellows know that I have scooped?” said Caithness abruptly.

“Not—not the fellow who shot Lil,” faltered Pen-low, who had thrown his whole soul into solving the mystery.

“Yes—the murderer of Lily White,” said Caithness. In the silence I could hear McManus grinding his toothpick in his yellow teeth.

“I’m out of the Consolidated now,” continued Caithness calmly,—“the scoop is yours if you want it, Penlow.”

“But—but you”—began Penlow.

“I?” said Caithness fiercely, “what do I care for newspapers? What do I care who knows it now, what paper prints it first?”

Lynde leaned over the table, his head in his hand; Penlow’s pipe went out; he did not relight it.

“Did you never know,” said Caithness with a touch of scorn in his voice, “that I also loved the girl? Do you think I am ashamed to confess it? Do you know what I have been through since she died? Hell? Oh, yes, that’s what they say in books. It doesn’t matter;—Penlow, when you are ready—”

Penlow started, then groped in his pocket for pencil and pad.

“I am ready, Jack,” he said.

“This is the story,” said Caithness, almost eagerly. “On the 13th of last November, Lily White, a girl living next door, was shot through the heart by a man who was jealous of her. He knew that she came into McManus’s and gossiped with the newspaper men, and he knew that Wah-Wo had offered her all his money, which was a great deal. When she was chatting with us here, this man was not jealous,—have you got that, Penlow?”

“Yes,” said Penlow, scratching away on his pad.

“He was not jealous when Lily chatted with us, but when he saw Wah-Wo talking to her one night under the electric light by the Joss-house, he watched the girl night and day. She said that she loved him—she laughed at him when he offered her marriage,—so he watched her. Have you got that, Penlow?”

“Yes.”

“Then a day came when Lily was to go to the country to see her sister,—that is what she said,—to see her sister, and this man went with her to the train and saw her off on her journey. But something told him to watch the next in-coming train, and he did. And Lily was on it.

“He followed her. She came straight to Doyers Street, heavily veiled, and entered a house that you all know,—the house with the paper lanterns and red signs. Wah-Wo lives there. A week later she returned to the man who had followed her. He was waiting for her, —have you written that?”

“Yes, Jack.”

“He was waiting in her room,—alone with that dog there. He accused her, and she denied it. She called Heaven to witness her innocence. He offered her marriage again; she laughed at him. Then he shot her through the heart.”

Penlow ceased writing and looked up expectantly.

“The murderer’s name? Have patience,” said Caithness grimly smiling. “The man called to the dog,—her dog there, and, because he was the only living soul who knew the brute’s name, the dog answered and followed him out into the street.

“All day long he wandered about the city, and at night he went back to look upon the dead. He did not care who saw him,—he courted discovery, but no one paid him any attention, and, as it now appears, nobody even saw him. About midnight he went away, leaving the dog crouched at the dead girl’s feet, and since then he has moved like a living death among the people of the city, unsuspected, unnoticed by any,—except me,” He paused and looked at us. Tears had quenched the pale flame in his eyes, and the hair clung to his damp forehead.

“That man killed the woman I loved,” he said, “and now I am going to give him up!” Then he rose trembling. The sleeping dog sighed heavily; his hind legs quivered.

Caithness bent and touched the massive head, muttering, “Come!”

At his touch the dog raised its head and looked at him with grave eyes.

Then, moving toward the door, he whispered again, *calling the dog by name*; and the great brute rose stiffly, yawned, and slowly followed him out into the night.

The iron door slammed behind them; the damp odour of fog came from the black street. Lynde buried his head in his hands; McManus leaned heavily on the bar, pale as a corpse. Presently I heard the sound of rustling paper.

It was Penlow, tearing up his pad.