

# A MEAL FOR THE DEVIL

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*Behind Yen Sing's daring challenge to his gods lay thousands of years of tradition. And the Devil stretched his scaly fingers for the defiant one who would break with his past*



YEN SING, his oily black queue slapping his back at every jounce, climbed to the top of the mast. From its height, he surveyed dazedly this harbor of the white man, full of bustle, full of excitement, fringed by the irregular wharves and piers of busy San Francisco. Yen Sing's slanting eyes noted everything—the plying ferry, the host of small boats, the green slime on the base of the wharf, whence rose a queer pungent odor to his sniffing nostrils.

The ship rose and fell gently on the bosom of the water. Yen Sing liked the lulling sensation. He liked the sparkle of the sun on the ocean. He liked



the tang of the salt breeze in his mouth and nose, its crisp caresses on his face.

Most of all he liked his position, high above the rest of the crew. He was exalted, a god, surveying the pitiful human world, spread in a panorama at his feet. Yen Sing shivered. He had no gods. He had foresworn his gods, called them vile names, and thumbed his nose at their crafty wiles, shaken his fist at their images, and then fled, quaking, from their wrath. Why not? What had his gods done for him, save to drive him from place to place, showering upon his rebellious head distress and misery, taking from him all that life held of joy and happiness? Small wonder that he

had cursed the gods of his fathers, and fled to strange lands to ease his miseries.

But they had sent after him devils, two chief devils and a number of subordinate and subservient devils. Chief among those was Mazpa, the boa constrictor, who undulated gently in his cage and darted his wicked fangs at the yellow, wizened Chinaman every time he passed him by. Yen Sing had no delusions about Mazpa. Whatever the little round bald Englishman, with the gold-rimmed spectacles said of Mazpa and the other creatures of the jungle which were being transported to England for some strange unfathomable purpose, Yen Sing knew better.

**I**T was not for nothing that the boa constrictor had been added to the cargo last of all, when Yen Sing himself had already signed his papers to go to foreign lands as a sailor on the jungle-ship. Mazpa was a devil—a fierce, and implacable devil—sent by Yen Sing’s outraged gods to kill their defiant ex-worshiper, and to conduct his blackened soul to its particular hell. Yen Sing had to be very wary of Mazpa. Sometimes he could stand the worry and the terror no longer and had to escape up the mast into the fresh sweet air of the outside world, to think and rest and gather courage to face again those coal-black, hard eyes, the darting fangs, the snapping jaws, the hostile hiss of the arch-devil, Mazpa.

Nor was Mazpa alone in his glory. There were at least a half dozen other serpents on the ship. These, to Yen Sing’s tortured brain, were satellites of the big devil, Mazpa. They were his attendants, lesser beings of the same world, lesser emissaries of his own enraged and avenging gods.

There were monkeys on the ship, too—friendly, chattering little beasts, who held out small hairy hands to Yen Sing, and smiled at him mockingly with their bright, canny eyes. He would stand before their cage whenever He could snatch a moment from his work, jabbering at them in language which the other sailors said was either their own or a kindred tongue, laying his yellow cheeks against the bars, giving them his pigtail to play with.

The monkeys he didn’t fear, nor the one lion, the two tigers, and the other large beasts of the jungle. He even liked the screaming, disapproving, gaudy tropical birds that flew

excitedly from side to side of their barred home when he approached them. But Mazpa and his snakes—there was a different story.

**O**NE other devil there was on board the ship, in league with Mazpa, perhaps, but certainly sent to the ship for the same purpose—to run down the Chinaman soul and body, and deliver him to the grasp of his pursuing gods. That was the devil with the thin, wailing voice, who lived in a long black reed, and talked to Sally, the red-headed sailor, whenever that blue-eyed, freckled-faced booze-loving son of the sea put his lips to the reed, and whispered to its inmates. Flute, they called this devil, and whenever he heard the sweet, shrill notes, Yen Sing cowered and hid his face in his hands. He would seek the farthest corner of the ship, and there remain in fierce and brooding terror until the notes were stilled, and the devil had retired. Then and then only, would he return to his work.

Sally, however, Yen Sing admired nightly. He was fond of this husky sailor in his own queer, Oriental way. He often longed to tell Sally that he was not the priest of a god, as he undoubtedly must think himself, but instead the guardian of a devil, relentless, persecuting, vicious, who would turn upon his own votary when once his way was gained, and rend him limb from limb. But he never could make Sally understand, so he finally gave up trying, and wore himself to a shadow longing for the day of release from the daily nightmare of Mazpa’s baleful eyes and the Flute’s shrill, pursuing voice.

Up in the sky, clinging to the mast, while the boat rocked gently to and fro in the arms of the water, Yen Sing forgot everything except the busy city spread out before his slanting eyes. He watched the smoke-wreathing itself from countless chimneys to spread its dark haze over the horizon; he marveled at the bustle about the waterfront.

The myriad noises of the city came to him as a subdued roar, like the, sound of distant thunder in the hills in summertime. Especially he admired the white shaft of the Customs House tower, rising from the lesser buildings surrounding it like a maiden above her worshipers. Tall and slim and white it stood, serene in the midst of turmoil.

What was that dark streak coiled about its

slenderness? Yen Sing shut his eyes in terror, for he seemed to discern a flat head, two yawning jaws, and the steady gleam of narrow, jetty eyes, Mazpa writhed and swayed on the tower's body. With a shudder, Yen Sing turned away.

Now Mazpa had ideas of his own concerning this jungle-ship. He detested his barred and bolted cage; he hated the motion of the ship. Back in his native jungles, the earth had remained steady, motionless. In this jail of his, this narrow, cramping space, in which he was permitted to exist, there were no tall trees, smooth of trunk, or covered with thick green verdure, whence he might rear his mighty head to survey his domain—the jungle. He loathed with a murderous hatred the white men who held him captive. He longed to enfold them within his gigantic coils, and crush their bones and flesh into one mass. Most of all he detested the wrinkled little yellow man who stole on tiptoe past his cage, shrinking from the infuriated glare of his eyes.

**T**ODAY, as a sailor came to his cage to feed him, Mazpa reared his ugly head with a threatening hiss, his fangs darting wickedly from his open jaws, his eyes fiendish. The sailor, overcome with sudden terror, rushed from the cage, leaving it open. Mazpa rolled forth in stately coils, rolled sedately to his freedom—rolled in quest of a tree.

Yen Sing bent his head, and the pigtail flopped over his shoulder and hung down; Yen Sing blinked. Fascinated, trembling, he looked the length of the mast to the deck below.

There, rearing upward, quite at his ease, as though he were scaling a tree in his native jungles, was Mazpa. Everywhere, it appeared, was Mazpa. Yen Sing closed his eyes; opened them. The vision remained. Came the paralyzing realization that the snake was no hallucination, but a reality.

In a cold sweat of terror, Yen Sing understood. The devil of his gods was ready to carry out their will. Who but a god or a devil would have released the heavy bars and bolts of Mazpa's cage?

The huge flat head reared itself up the mast, diamond hard eyes fixed brilliantly on his. Behind the flattened head lay coil on coil of scales, shining in the sunlight, twisted about the smooth mast like a bracelet on a virgin's arm.

Yen Sing opened his lips to call for help. No sounds issued from them. He gagged with terror. A tremendous fascination drew his eyes to those of the serpent.

Slowly, silently, the snake made his persistent, relentless advance, his forked tongue darting from his scarlet fangs. The Chinaman's body shook, then stiffened. He began to regard his enemy with a stare as glassy as its own. His body, his limbs, his vocal organs were completely paralyzed, it seemed. An age of inertia, and then, very slowly but very surely, he began to move down the mast. Inch by inch he edged nearer, inch by inch Mazpa crept up.

Below, on the deck, the crew were searching for Mazpa, searching with a silent speed that proved how unwelcome a guest Mazpa was, unfettered. The sun still shone, and the waters still danced, but there was a chill in the sunshine, and a threat, a mocking, in the dancing. Sally, his red hair ruffled by the fingers of the breeze, remembered that nature was man's age-old enemy. His lips were tight over his uneven teeth. Through his brain seethed strange thoughts. He thought of Mazpa's mighty coils crushing out the life of a man as easily as he could break a soda-water straw; he wondered what had become of the little yellow Chink. Then he coupled the two thoughts and shuddered.

Below was the blue water, above was the blue sky, with white gulls speeding through its color. His eyes followed their flight mechanically as he straightened a moment to wipe the perspiration from his freckled face. The birds disappeared behind the mast. Sally's mouth fell open, his head jerked back; his eyes widened, his face became a mask of horror.

Up the mast undulated the giant snake; down the mast, a man in another world, edged Yen Sing. While one might have counted ten, the sailor stood like a man in a trance, his gaze riveted on the gently swaying mast.

**T**HEN he leaped to action. He summoned the rest of the crew. But what could they do? What could any of them do? Powerless to move, they stood, silent, head upturned, watching, watching. Finally Sally, his body shaking, in a sweat, managed to rouse himself somehow from the coma of terror. He shouted.

The little Englishman appeared from below the deck, a gun under one arm. He followed the mesmerized gaze of the sailors upward. Years in the jungle had taught him self-reliance, self-control. He brought his gun slowly to his shoulder, aimed it. But he didn't fire.

A shout from Sally halted his finger on the trigger. A whispered conclave, and Sally disappeared below decks; the Englishman, his hand on his gun, took up a position behind the sailors. His face was troubled, but he was alert, eager—for what? Still the serpent rolled his sickening coils up; still Yen Sing, his pigtail jerking on his shoulder as the boat dipped to the waves, crept slowly downward.

Of the turmoil on the deck, Yen Sing knew nothing. His consciousness was limited to one vivid sensation against a background of unfathomable black—two fiery bits of light, now pin-pricks, now balls of menacing flame, dissolving again into the black of nothingness. He had forgotten that Mazpa was a devil, forgotten his loves, his hatreds, his fears. His whole world lay in those two compelling beacons.

Through the blankness, coming from another planet, pierced a sound, a shrill, thin, wailing sound.

This was the second devil, Flute. Mazpa could not do the trick alone, he needed help. For one brief second, Yen Sing was conscious of a darting, brief-lived, poignant triumph. At least he was not succumbing tamely. It took two devils—two chief devils—to master his stubborn soul.

He loathed the whining voice of Flute, who lived in a black reed, but his bosom swelled with pride. If only he could tear his gaze from those points of flame, he might fool them both. But his momentary return to awareness was gone. Impelled by a power he could not resist, he was forced to watch the pin-pricks. Sound faded from his consciousness. The world vanished. He was alone in space with beacons of light, which he must reach. But his legs would not hasten, nor stop moving. He could deviate neither to the left, nor the right.

**O**N the deck, one or two of the crew tore their gaze from the significant silhouettes on the mast, and buried their faces in trembling hands. Their strength was gone. They could no longer

watch. The face of the little Englishman was wooden in expression. His fingers played nervously over the barrel of his gun. Drops of perspiration rolled unheeded down his cheeks.

Mazpa, scales shining, calmly proceeded on his journey. Once more he was happy—seeking his prey on a smooth, tall tree.

The song of the flute rose in the air, sure, unwavering, gaining strength with every precious moment. It soared above the deck, clear, confident, wheedling. It wailed, sighed, cajoled. Never had Sally so played before. Never, probably, would he so play again, for now he was playing for the tremendous stake of a human life. Through the black reed he begged and called. The song was seductive—a beautiful woman begging a favor, a lover wooing, persuasive, tender. Mazpa's flat ugly head swayed in time to the music, but his beady eyes remained fixed on the Chinaman, so near him now. The fangs darted against the sky in a fine forked thread of black. The flute sobbed and pleaded. Mazpa's head swayed slowly, lazily. The flute never ceased to beg. Mighty, ceaseless undulations—a shrill soft voice, wheedling, caressing—coils gleaming, flashing as they moved along the shining mast in the light of the sun, deliberately, inch by inch, scaly arch by scaly arch, giant coil by giant coil—still the seductive voice, the wheedling cajolery.

**A** MOMENT pregnant with suspense, teeming with hope, with fear—cessation of motion, climax of sound—awful silence—a moment brief, yet measured by aeons. Again the undulations; the shrill, sweet summons.

Yen Sing, two tiny points light suddenly flashing from his consciousness, pitched into the blankness they had left. The sailors, swiftly galvanized into action by sharp, almost hysterical orders from the fat Englishman, who threw his gun clattering onto the deck to help them, caught the yellow man in a blanket and rolled him onto the deck.

A shudder convulsed the thin frame—and then another. His hands were icy, inert. One of the sailors chafed them roughly, his own none too warm. Yen Sing thought himself dead, the thin sweet voice of Flute piercing loud in his ears. With a shriek he rolled over, his eyes starting from his head. The two devils were conducting his

soul to its allotted hell!

SAN FRANCISCO spread a dust-colored haze over the horizon. White-faced sailors were clustered about him. This was the deck of the jungle-ship. And, amazing spectacle! His mouth dropped widely open; perspiration stood in droplets on his forehead.

Red-headed Sally, his face like paste sprinkled with the cinnamon of his freckles, backed slowly out of sight behind the cabin. Between his lips was a long, black reed, from which issued compelling music, and after him, his eyes half-closed, his head swaying in time to the motion of his coils, while the sailors stood rigid with fascinated repulsion, glided Mazpa, a dazed captive.

A glass was pressed against the Chinaman's bloodless lips. He opened them, and swallowed automatically. His throat burned, but the reality of the world began to return. Sally appeared on the

deck, walking unsteadily.

"You'd orter see him, fellers," he said, swaying up to the still transfixed group. "All curled up for a nice nap, quiet as a lamb." Then, more jerkily, "Give me a drink, quick!"

"He would have fallen, had not the little Englishman, who had followed him across the deck, caught his arm.

Yen Sing, kneeling there, his bright, almond-slanted eyes turning from one to the other of the crowd, slowly comprehended. The Flute, then, was a conqueror of devils, and Mazpa's evil struggle for one more soul had failed just as it was ended, because of Flute, who lived in a black reed and spoke with a shrill voice. Here was a god more powerful than those he had foresworn, a white man's God, and it had saved him—him! He clasped Sally's wide-trousered leg.

"Let me worship thy strange god, oh, Sally," he murmured in his native tongue.